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A CENTURY AGO, ONE DISCOVERY
BROUGHT THE GALAXY
TO THE BRINK OF DESTRUCTION

HISTORY
IS
ABOUT
TO
REPEAT
ITSELF

THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES PRESENTS

AGAMEMNON VOYAGES

THE
G Ω D
PARTICLE

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AGAMEMNON VOYAGES #1

BASED UPON 'STAR TREK[®]'

BASED UPON “STAR TREK®” CREATED BY
Gene Roddenberry

“THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES” WRITTEN AND CREATED BY
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To learn more about these great fan fiction series please visit UnitedTrek.org.

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."
George Santayana

The Delta Quadrant 2264 Old Earth Calendar

Up until recently the Xenarth had seen themselves as the most technologically advanced, industrious and culturally sophisticated race in the known galaxy. Their scientific excellence unquestionable, their mighty warriors without equal, the efficiency of their immense workforce unparalleled while their artisans' imagination was as boundless as their clerics' dedication to the All-Mother's will was illimitable.

In short, nothing and no one could ever threaten the Xenarth's gods-given cultural superiority.

Until the day they met the Borg.

Within a week, their once seemingly immeasurable fleet of swarm ships had been reduced to a mere hundreds of vessels, desperate to protect their last remaining world, home of the Colony, Xenarth Prime.

The Borg invasion of their territory had been swift and merciless. And contrary to the cyborg's ubiquitous battle cry, they had never bothered to assimilate the Xenarth, apparently not even deeming the insectoids to be a worthwhile addition to their collective.

Instead the Borg were after something infinitely more valuable to them.

* * *

Queen Quelphi looked up at the sky-high monstrosity in front of her with unmasked disgust, evidenced by her extended mandibles and crooked antennae.

Like all members of the Xenarth Colony, Quelphi had evolved from the lowly insect life on her planet over millennia. She now stood nearly two meters tall, on long slender legs with a trim torso. To a foreign anthropologist, Quelphi would have been a prime example of a perfect symbiosis of a humanoid and an insectoid. While she walked upright and on two legs, her insect heritage was all too obvious thanks to her set of lower arms right underneath her longer upper limbs which brought the

total number of her extremities to six. Her skull was oblong in shape with two jutting compound eyes which gave her a nearly one-hundred-eighty degree viewing angle. She relied on a set of v-shaped antennae on her head for olfactory senses and two mandibles protruding close to her mouth were sharp enough to be used as weapons.

As the reigning Warrior Queen of the Aggregate, the ruling council of the Xenarth, she despised the towering display of technological arrogance in front of her with a passion. The device stood nearly a hundred floors high, reaching far into the darkened sky and measured dozens of paces in diameter. At the very top it bulged outward like a blooming flower with sharp curves which the scholars and clerics had found pleasing.

Quelphi found nothing pleasing about the Star Portal. In fact she was convinced that all their bad fortune of late could be placed solely at the feet of this infernal device and the power source which fed its incalculable appetite.

And now it had supposedly become their only salvation.

"Another eighty swarm ships have been destroyed. At this rate, we expect that their main force will land on Prime before dawn."

Quelphi was barley listening to Queen Arga's report of their impending doom as she was too busy wordlessly cursing what she saw as the bringer of their undoing.

"By all accounts we have lost some sixty million colonists within the last fifty eight *lirkiks*. Supreme Semunstra is confident however that with the help of the Portal, we will be able to save ten to twenty million of what remains of the Colony," continued the Worker Queen. "Ergia is convinced that it is more than enough to rebuild once we arrive. She says that the God-Queen will provide whatever we require in Xendaru."

The Warrior Queen uttered a sharp whistling sound, a sarcastic laugh. "The God-Queen will provide. How about the millions we have lost already? Will the All-Mother provide for them as well?"

"The expired will be as reborn in Xendaru," said Arga.

Quelphi whipped around to face the Worker Queen for the first time. "Well quoted. But do you believe it, Arga? I mean, truly believe like the clerics and their Queen? Are you as convinced that our fallen sisters and brothers will be waiting to greet us once we trigger this infernal device?"

The Worker Queen hesitated for a moment, her feelers twitched slightly, giving away her insecurity. "To say otherwise ... to believe otherwise, it would be heresy."

Quelphi uttered a subdued whistle and then stepped closer to her fellow Queen. She placed her upper arms on the smaller insectoid's shoulders. "It's just you and me now, Arga. The Cleric Queen is nowhere near, and neither are her one-minded disciples. You may speak your mind freely, my friend. Do you truly believe Xendaru awaits beyond the portal?"

"I have seen the power of the Xendaru particle up close. My workers have labored on the Star Portal for half a generation and we have suffered and sacrificed thousands in this pursuit."

The Warrior Queen pushed her away with an angry whistle. "You have sacrificed thousands? The invaders have killed millions of my warriors."

The Worker Queen immediately lowered her head and her antennae along with them in a deferential gesture. They may have been equals in the Aggregate chambers, but angering the Warrior Queen was not a healthy proposition. "Apologies, I meant no insult. There is no comparison to the sacrifice of your soldiers. I merely meant to say that the Xendaru particle's power nearly destroyed us all on many an occasion. Something so powerful, it has to have the ability to create miracles."

"And a miracle we shall require if we are to ever lay eyes on a mystical realm known to us solely from stories and fables."

"But if they remain true," said Argia carefully, "we shall be at everlasting peace with the All-Mother and escape this wretched plane for good as well as these invaders. Is this not something to aspire to?"

"Younglings and fools aspire," the Warrior Queen shot back harshly. "Deeds are what matter and the decisions we have made speak poorly of the state of the Colony. We have invited our own doom by expanding too quickly and embracing forces we barely comprehend."

"We no longer have a choice. The Kothlis'Ka, the Bunati and many others have already taken to the stars to find homes elsewhere and escape this unstoppable plague that is sweeping the galaxy. Nothing has been able to stop them."

"Yes," said Quelphi and looked upon the massive portal again. "And I think I know why. They have long since learned of the power of this so-called Xendaru particle. What Semunstra has foolishly pursued for decades as the savior of the Colony is directly to blame for our own undoing." She turned to the Worker Queen once more. "Listen to me well. Nothing good has ever come out of the leadership of a Scholar Queen. The supreme is singlehandedly overseeing the downfall of our people."

“The Colony loves her. They believe in her.”

“They believe the lies they have been fed by Semunstra and the Cleric Queen. No, to save the colony, new leadership is required.”

At that Argia gasped. “Are you suggesting to ... remove Semunstra?”

Quelphi’s antennae quivered slightly. “If Semunstra is gone, Ergia the Cleric Queen would be next in line to become supreme and her rule would potentially be even more calamitous. The Aggregate requires firmer leadership. Somebody who will once again focus the tremendous power of the Colony inwards, instead of desperately trying to reach the stars and place all their trust into cursed technology and flawed science.”

“Like a Warrior Queen?”

“Why not? Let me ask you this. If a bold move would have to be made for the good of the Colony, could I count on your support?”

The Worker Queen hesitated once more. “A change in leadership now would not be wise. The hour of the Star Portal is nearly upon us.”

Quelphi jerked her head, acceding that point. Even if there was a manner in which to rid the Colony of both the supreme and her heir apparent, the Colony would never accept a new supreme who’d abandon the Star Portal within hours of its first activation. “Then after.”

“If the Portal is successful in trans-phasing the Colony to Xendaru—”

“If it is not?”

“Then the supreme would have failed the Colony on a scale unprecedented in our history. New leadership would be called for.”

Quelphi’s mandibles curved into something resembling a smile. A change of leadership before the ruling supreme had passed was unheard of in the Colony ever since the beginning of the Aggregate hundreds of years ago. But then again the Colony had never been faced with extinction before.

* * *

The Borg quickly decimated the remaining swarm ships protecting Xenarth Prime and the massive cubes surrounded the planet in order to prepare for the final strike against its people. But the few million Xenarth who remained on the surface were no longer afraid of impending death. Instead they huddled together at every corner of their world, preparing themselves for their final journey towards ultimate salvation. Most were convinced

that just in a matter of minutes, each and every one of them would come face-to-face with their god.

Teetering at the cusp of total annihilation, Xenarth Prime had been gripped by blissful euphoria.

At the base of the Star Portal only the five members of the Aggregate remained, while the workers and scholars responsible for initiating its awesome power were watching from a control room afar.

Semunstra, the Scholar Queen and current supreme, and the person most responsible for pushing the Colony towards the research of the Xendaru particle which in turn had made the Star Portal possible, turned to her fellow queens. "The moment is upon us," she said reverently. "Shortly we will be leaving this plane behind and step into the future of our Colony."

Quelphi was anything but reverent. "I will say it one more time. This is a waste of our time and resources. We should attempt to unleash the power of the Xendaru particle against the invaders who as we speak are preparing to lay waste to all we have sweat and died for to build."

"Your objections have become repetitive and tiresome," said Cleric Queen Eriga sharply. "You would do well to remember the supremes' decree and behave accordingly."

"And what if I do not?"

The Cleric Queen's mandibles twitched angrily. She knew that there was little she could do about Quelphi's defiance. Members of the Aggregate were above reproach in most cases and even the supreme could not relieve a fellow Queen of her title unless in extenuating circumstances. Those were the ways of the Aggregate and had been for centuries.

"The hour for talk and deliberation has passed. We must now embrace the will of the All-Mother."

"Do as you must," said the Warrior Queen with dramatic flair. "I want my opposition to this noted. Once again."

"And once again, it has been noted," said Selphi, the Artisan Queen, who had always taken great care to try and reconcile the differences between the Warrior Queen and the Cleric and Scholar Queens. Mostly in vain. "Right or wrong, we must all agree that it is no longer feasible to explore any alternative to attempt to save the Colony."

"Oh my dear Selphi, you have such a gift for understating the obvious, it borders on cowardice. And you conveniently fail to mention how you and all of us had many such opportunities but we chose instead

to ignore them all and put our entire faith into a power we barely even understand. Mark my words, all of you, this will not lead us to salvation and when the inevitable comes to pass, I hope you will recall my warnings.”

“You have spoken your piece, Warrior Queen. Now temper yourself so that we may commence the ceremony,” said the supreme and promptly deferred to the Cleric Queen. “Ergia, it has been your tireless effort that has brought us to this moment of reunification with the God-Queen. Will you not do us the honor of taking the first step?”

Ergia nodded eagerly. “Nothing would give me more pleasure,” she said and then stepped closer to the towering Star Portal. She turned to look at the rest of the Aggregate and then raised all four of her arms high into the air, the signal to begin.

The portal behind her rumbled as it began to power up, collecting energy directly from the subterranean generators which had been designed to synthesize and harvest the tremendous power of the Xendaru particle.

The portal erupted with light, turning night into day and blinding everyone within a thousand miles. Moments later the amassed energy exploded outwards to create an energy field that within seconds enveloped the entire surface of Xenarth Prime.

The Cleric Queen felt her entire body vibrate as the field washed over her and she cried out in blissful joy:

“The All-Mother awaits.”

Darkness more complete than a starless night followed.

2

The Beta Quadrant Three Years Later

It had been just a little over a year since he had taken the reins of the USS *Lexington* and yet both the ship and crew under his command had already become as familiar as his favorite leather jacket. Not just familiar, they felt right. And more importantly, he felt right. About the ship, about the people who crewed it, about their abilities and their potential. It was as if it was all meant to be.

Robert Wesley had never believed in something as intangible as fate or destiny and yet for some time now he had not been able to shake the feeling that he belonged in that chair on that ship with those exact people around him.

And with that sense it mattered little to him if he was out there exploring a never before seen star system, defending the Federation from belligerent Klingons or carrying out a milk run between far flung outposts and starbases. As long as he was on his ship surrounded by his crew, the universe could throw at him whatever it felt like.

And yet Doctor Bendes Archibald Ketteract had somehow managed to seriously test the limits of this theory, not to mention his patience.

"I'm telling you we have to get closer. A lot closer. We're not going to find anything but space dust out here," Ketteract said, repeating a conversation which had played out multiple times over the last three days on the *Lexington*.

"If we get any closer to where you have us go we'll be right in the Romulans' backyard. We might as well wave a flag and say here we are, come and take a shot at us," said Terrence Lawford in a crisp English accent.

The middle-aged molecular scientist glared at the navigator. "If that's where my readings take us than that's where we have to go," he said. "Romulans or no Romulans."

The first officer cleared his throat. "Doctor, we all appreciate the importance of your work—"

"I am seriously beginning to question that you do."

Cutting off the burly Russian had not been a wise decision. "Doctor, I would prefer if you do not interrupt me when I'm speaking."

The scientist visibly flinched at the tone in the man's voice.

The bridge itself fell dead silent except for the soft, almost melodic beeps and blips of the instruments surrounding the crew.

After a moment the chastised Ketteract turned to look towards Wesley, wordlessly imploring him to do or say something after the all so obvious mistreatment he had received at the hands of the people under his command.

Wesley rubbed his temple then looked towards the view screen as if considering where they were and where he had asked them to go. Then he swiveled in his chair to come face to face with the scientist. "I full well know of the importance of your work, Doctor, but I cannot order this ship within close proximity of the Neutral Zone and risk a war with the Romulans in order to satisfy your scientific curiosity."

Not what he had wanted to hear. He stepped closer. "But Commodore, all the readings we've recorded over the last week, all the work we have poured into this project since we've been out here have pointed us firmly into one direction. The answers we are looking for are out there," he said with rising passion quite evident in the tone of his voice as he pointed towards the star field on the viewer.

When it became obvious that he was going to be unable to sway Wesley he turned away in frustration and stepped back up to the elevated platform surrounding the sunken command well. He paced there for a moment before addressing the commodore again. "Consider for a moment what we have been doing out here all this time. Trying to localize strange and unfamiliar energy readings which have seemingly appeared out of nowhere. An energy signature so significant that Starfleet has deemed it necessary to use the full resources of one of its flagships to investigate them. Are you really willing to go back to Starfleet and tell them that you were unable to find the source of these readings because you were too

sacred of where it would lead you?" he said and focused intently on Wesley.

"If it averts intergalactic war," responded Kuznetsov instead. "You bet."

Ketteract glared at the Russian but didn't get a chance to respond as just then the alert beacon in between the navigation and helm station began flashing in an urgent red.

"Report," barked Kuznetsov.

"Sensors have detected a massive shockwave at two-four-one mark six-eight. It's coming right towards us," said Lawford as he manipulated the buttons and dials on his console.

Wesley swivel his chair towards one of the aft stations to find his science officer. "Talana."

The graceful Andorian woman, dressed in an azure miniskirt uniform which tended to clash with her already naturally blue skin, had already turned towards her sensor hood to get a better reading on what Lawford had discovered. "Not sure what it is yet but it's coming at us fast. It'll hit in less than fifteen seconds."

"Where the hell did it come from?" the first officer wanted to know.

Wesley punched the ship-wide on his armrest which immediately triggered the boatswain whistle to catch the crew's attention. "All hands prepare for imminent impact with a shockwave."

On the bridge the order was followed instantly and everyone firmly planted their feet and found something to hold on to in order to avoid being flung across the room.

Ketteract remained rooted in place as if uncertain what exactly he should be doing.

Kuznetsov rolled his eyes and then prompted him to cling tightly to the railing around the command well before doing the same.

"Deflector shields to full. Aliz, try to steer the bow into the wave."

Ensign Bathory, the young helmswoman, nodded sharply and then attempted to change *Lexington's* orientation before the unknown energy wave would hit the ship.

On the screen the stars disappeared only to be replaced by a wall of angry blue energy which had come out of nowhere and looked as if it would have little trouble to sweep the comparatively tiny ship out of its path.

Then the shockwave hit and as much as they tried, nobody managed to hold on. For just a moment gravity appeared to have reversed itself and every single officer on the bridge was ripped away from their position and flung towards the back of the bridge.

At the same time consoles left and right shorted out or exploded in a shower of hot sparks which rained down onto the unprotected bridge crew, singeing skin and clothes in the process.

Wesley had the wherewithal to catch Aliz Bathory before she went flying past him. She gave him a thankful look as they hung suspended in the air for a moment and he responded with a kind smile.

Then the ship began to right itself again but not nearly fast enough for Wesley's tastes. He pulled the helmswoman back towards her station until she was able to grab hold of her chair and attend to the flight controls.

She immediately fired the dorsal thrusters allowing the *Lexington* to normalize on her flight axis again and within moments the stabilizers and inertial dampers had compensated as well. Of course by then the shockwave had long passed.

"I think I just threw up in my mouth," said Ketteract, holding a hand in front of his mouth and the other against his forehead where he had bruised himself.

"Don't worry, Doctor, you'll get your space legs yet," said Kuznetsov before he helped communications officer Cillia Oudekirk back into her chair. "Get medical and damage control teams up here. Then warn any other ships within range."

The Dutch woman nodded before she tugged down to straighten her uniform dress and then reinserted her earpiece to make the required calls.

In the meantime Wesley was rounding the bridge and helping fallen crewmembers back to their station until he reached Talana Zha'Thara who was already checking her sensors. "What was that thing, Commander?"

"I'm not entirely sure, I've never seen anything quite like it but preliminary readings suggest that it carried a similar energy reading as the residual traces we've been chasing for the last few days."

This immediately caught Ketteract's full attention. His bruises and queasiness forgotten, he practically pushed the Andorian away from her own station. "My God, she's right. This is it. This is it," he said with rising euphoria, his eyes completely focused on the sensor readings.

Zha'Thara and Wesley exchanged a telling look before the commodore focused on the scientist again. "Would you mind being more specific, Doctor. This is what, exactly?"

It took him a moment to find the right words to answer him. "It's what we've been looking for. I can't tell you exactly what we're dealing with yet. Not with complete certainty. But whatever it is, it is much more powerful than we've ever imagined."

"It's powerful alright," said Kuznetsov. "It knocked out our warp engines and G'arv is screaming and yelling up and down engineering. From the sounds of it, it'll be a couple of hours until we're back on the move."

Wesley nodded. "But on the move to where?" he said and then headed back towards his chair. "Terrence, can you pinpoint where that shockwave originated from?"

Lawford peeked through the sensor hood at his station. He did a double take before turning back to his captain. "You're not going to like this, sir."

"Out with it, man," the first officer said.

"As far as I can tell the shockwave originated 2.3 light years from our present position and inside the Iota Crucis system close to the Romulan Neutral Zone."

The bridge fell silent again.

A moment later a handful of medics, nurses and damage control officers entered the bridge and began to tend to the injured crewmembers and damaged systems.

Ketteract clearly couldn't take it any longer and turned to Wesley. "Commodore, we have to—"

But the veteran Starfleet officer shut the man up with nothing more than a raised hand.

He looked at his first officer and from the Russian's facial expression he seemed to already suspect what was coming. "Commander, get down to engineering and light whatever fires you have to in order to get our engines up and running again. It looks like we're heading towards the Romulan border and I'd rather have the ship up to the task for it."

3

The Beta Quadrant One Hundred and Five Years Later

There weren't any tropical forests on her world and for good reason.

Hers was a cold world of unforgiving temperatures and rough terrain. A world befitting a warrior people where only the strong survived and the weak perished.

Granted, it was an old fashioned view of Andorian society but it suited her, especially now as she stalked through this dense jungle, trying her best to ignore the myriad of bugs and insects, yearning after her blood, the irritatingly bright green colors all around her and the damned heat and humidity which kept her skin covered in a perpetual film of sweat and her clothes uncomfortably damp.

She halted once more as she did every few steps, crouching low on the mushy forest floor and listening intently. She thought she heard a bird cry somewhere nearby. She wasn't sure if it was a mating call or if it was on the hunt and she cared little at this point.

The antennae on her head stood at full attention as they assisted her already keen senses in trying to track her enemy she knew to be in the vicinity. If she just stayed perfectly still and with her normally light blue skin and combat fatigues camouflaged to her jungle surroundings, she was nearly impossible to spot with the naked eye.

Movement, just a few meters up ahead.

Instead of heading straight towards it, she set out very slowly on a parallel trajectory, trying to flank whoever she thought she had spotted up ahead. She took extra pains to ensure to avoid stepping into rustling leaves or cracking twigs, adopting a well practiced stealth approach.

She never lost sight of her target and by the time she had maneuvered herself into the perfect ambush position, she already knew what to expect.

She brought up her black phaser rifle and closed in for deadly accuracy. There were three of them and under different circumstances she would have been delighted to find that they made an easy target, carelessly keeping their guard down.

She had managed to get within just a few meters of the unaware group, close enough to smell their sweat and then took aim. "Marines."

All three of them whipped around, their rifles at the ready.

The one closest to her recognized her almost instantly. "Oorah," he said quietly.

"Oorah," she responded and then stood. "And by the way, you're all dead."

"Lieutenant," said Corporal Sonier, the most senior Marine in the group, quickly and most likely in order to hide his embarrassment of being ambushed by his company commander. "We thought you were a goner for sure."

First Lieutenant Beatiar Sh'Fane lowered her rifle and shook her head. "Not quite. I managed my way out of the valley just in time before the explosives went off. Who else got out?"

Sonier hesitated.

"Who's left in Alfa Squad?" she said when she didn't get a response.

"We're all that's left, ma'am," said Private Yiren, a short unjoined Trill who had been a rifleman with Alfa Squads' Fireteam Two.

"How about Bravo?"

Sonier shook his head. "Sergeant Marcus was covering our flank but had to engage the enemy directly when they doubled back. I think they completely took out the enemy."

The Andorian aimed a pointed look at Sonier. "Then where are they now?"

"They didn't make it, ma'am."

Sh'Fane tried to rein in her impatience. "Corporal, you just told me they took out the enemy."

"There is somebody left," said the third man, another private. His voice was unsteady, betraying not just his youth and inexperience but also unmistakable anxiety.

"How many?"

Again they hesitated. Clearly none of them wanted to answer.

"How many?" she said again, her voice taking on a sharp edge even while she kept her volume low enough to avoid giving away their position to whoever was still out there.

"Just one, ma'am," Sonier finally admitted.

"One?"

"He's good," the private quickly tried to explain. "Really good. And fast. He's taken out Second Platoon almost single handedly. We just can't get a bead on him, it's almost as if he's not really there. It's like he's everywhere and nowhere."

"Jeez, calm down, Pedro. He ain't a ghost," said Sonier.

"Might as well be."

Sh'Fane looked at Sonier. "Do you have a location?"

"Would be easier if we had access to tricorders."

"Well, we don't, so no point in moaning about it," she said sharply. "We do this the old fashioned way."

Sonier nodded. "From what we can tell, last time anyone saw him, he was somewhere near the clearing to the west."

"Nobody saw him," Pedro mumbled.

The lieutenant ignored the private. "I don't care how good or how fast he is, Charlie Company will not be taken down by a single individual. Do I make myself clear?"

There were nods, some more hesitant than others.

"I take point. Spread out and stay frosty," she said as he brought her rifle back up and began to head towards the clearing, the three Marines following her.

She could hear that bird cry again and this time it seemed to be much closer. Then she heard the leaves above them rustling slightly and she took one knee and stopped, indicating her people to do the same by holding up her right fist.

She couldn't feel the slightest breeze on her face.

"He's here," whispered Pedro. "He's here."

Sh'Fane had to agree that something indeed was here. She scanned the thick, green canopy above but could spot nothing out of the ordinary.

Then she heard the scream.

She whipped around just in the time to see something grab Pedro and drag him off his feet and into the dense underbrush of the jungle.

Whatever it was, it had moved so fast, she hadn't been able to make it out.

Sonier and Yrien immediately opened fire but it was already too late for the private.

"Cease fire, cease fire," she called out, concerned that they'd inadvertently take out their own man.

The shooting stopped.

"Did you get a look at that? What the hell was it?" Sonier said.

But neither Yrien nor Sh'Fane could answer.

And then the rustling sound overhead again. This time the lieutenant took it as a sign of another impending attack and whipped around again only to see a large mass swoop down from above and go after the Trill. He was carried away before she could get a clear shot on the attacker.

"Damn it," Sonier cried. "It must be more than one. Two, maybe three of them?"

Sh'Fane shook her head, keeping her eyes on their surroundings and trying to anticipate the direction of the next attack. "No. It's just the one."

Her antennae picked up the movement first and she knew instantly that their attacker was going after Sonier next. "Get down," she yelled and got up to get to him.

"Huh?"

It was already too late.

She managed to get off one shot at the approaching 'thing' but missed before it grabbed the Marine by the shoulders and pulled him into the foliage above as he screamed.

His phaser rifle fell at Sh'Fane's feet.

She brought her own weapon up and spying through its viewfinder she aimed it at the canopy where Sonier had disappeared into. There was urgent rustling for a moment before everything was perfectly still again. She had no target.

"Okay," she said, now left all by herself. "So you're fast."

She heard the bird cry once more. This time louder and more aggressive, originating from somewhere right above her.

"Definitely out for the hunt," she said and took off running at full speed, dashing past tree branches and leaping over obstacles effortlessly. Sometimes the best strategy was a tactical retreat.

Within moments she had her attacker exactly where she had wanted him. She could feel him swoop in on her from behind and immediately dropped down and rolled on the forest floor, feeling something trying to grab her but coming away with nothing more than scraps of her fatigues.

She came up firing. Two burst in quick succession but she knew at once that she had hit nothing of consequence.

Whatever it was she was fighting, not only was it fast, it seemed to defy gravity.

"Alright," she said, "Let's change the playing field, shall we?" Sh'Fane dropped the rifle and sprinted towards a nearby tree. She leaped right at the massive trunk, giving herself enough of a boost to reach the lowest bough which must have hung about three meters off the ground.

She easily pulled herself up and then jumped up onto the next branch, all of which sturdy enough to support her weight, as she climbed upwards by leaps and bounds.

She estimated that she was a good twenty meters above ground when she stopped and took a knee near the trunk and hidden amongst the thick green foliage.

Once again she relied on her finely honed senses to tell her that her enemy was nearby. This time she had no interest in waiting to let him come to her. She wanted to turn the tables.

Sh'Fane pulled free the knife she carried strapped to her leg and then took off and down the length of the bough.

She took a calculated jump and impacted with something large and soft in midair which screeched loudly upon making contact.

She held on tight as they went tumbling downwards end over end, hitting numerous branches on their way which helped slow their fall. The sound of urgent flapping and a strong sudden draft came just before they hit the ground with a loud thud. Her attacker absorbed the brunt of the impact but it hardly slowed him down as he immediately began to fight her for dominance.

They rolled for a few meters, each of them trying to end up on top until Sh'Fane managed to get her knife at his throat.

The avian's blue eyes looked up at her right past his prominent beak. He wore a modified Starfleet uniform with a gold shoulder trim which allowed his large wings to protrude from his back. At the moment they laid spread out and flat against the ground.

"You lose, Lieutenant," she said with the knife at his amber-feathered neck which was so fine it looked like fur.

That's when she felt something press against her chest and saw his eyes lightening up.

"Drop the knife," he said in a distinctly high-pitched, almost screechy voice.

She looked down to see that he had managed to bring an arm up against her and now the razor-sharp talons on his fingers were digging into her fatigues. And just to prove how dangerous they were, he effortlessly shredded the collar of her top.

Sh'Fane couldn't have cared less about the state of her fatigues and instead applied more pressure on his neck. "Disengage or I will cut your throat."

"Remove the knife or I'll gut you wide open."

"I'll admit that your tactics were efficient. You and your people managed to hold out much longer than I had expected but it's over now," she said. "I've won."

"You are mistaken. You have won nothing. Admittedly you've overwhelmed my men but I took out at least half your people by myself. Overall I'm rather disappointed."

She shook her head. "Doesn't matter. I'm still standing and you're at my mercy."

The sound coming out of his beak was fairly close to a sarcastic laugh. "Another misconception, I'm afraid. Computer, end program."

The jungle was instantly replaced by the gridded holodeck and Sh'Fane suddenly found herself without a knife while the Aurelian Starfleet officer still had his talons against her chest. He made use of her momentary distraction of seeing her weapon disintegrate in her hand and applied just enough pressure to the palm of his hand to push her off of him.

He gracefully stood to his impressive height, allowing his large wings to stretch out to their full imposing span.

The Andorian picked herself off the floor, refusing to be intimidated by his posturing display and barely able to keep her rising anger in check. "You are cheating."

He considered her for a moment. "I have talons, Lieutenant. They are part of me. All you had was a knife. A knife can easily be removed."

"So can your claws," she said. "And that would be a hell of a lot more painful to you."

"You're welcome to try. Point is, you were unable to score a decisive victory," he said and turned towards the exit. "Perhaps you and your people should train a little harder before we try this again."

“My people need to train harder?” she said with disbelief. “Last time I checked, we moped up your security squad like they were first year recruits. Perhaps it is your people who need more practice. If you ask me nicely enough, I might consider providing a lesson or two.”

Lieutenant Lure Mer’iab stopped and turned. “I recommend you watch your place, Lieutenant. I am chief of security of this vessel and you and your Marines are merely guests here. I’ve given you a chance to prove to me that you have what it takes to take on more responsibilities and so far you have failed to impress me.”

The Andorian took a confrontational step forward. “You are worried about your job, aren’t you? You know that my Marines can do much better at providing security than your people ever could and you can bet your ass that that’s exactly what I will be putting in my reports to the captain and Marines Command.”

“Put into your report what you wish, Lieutenant. While you are on *Agamemnon* you’re on my turf and you will follow my rules,” he said and continued towards the exit.

“We are not done discussing this,” she said.

“We most certainly are,” Mer’iab said just as he stepped through the parted doors.

Agamemnon, 2372

Robert DeSoto, Junior was having the time of his life and why not? He had only recently graduated from Starfleet Academy and had already secured a dream job as the helmsman of the brand new *Akira*-class USS *Agamemnon*. And while his academic grades had been decent, he was well aware that some questioned his appointment to such a coveted position. He was fairly cognizant that a number of his fellow graduates hedged suspicions that his influential father had pulled the necessary strings to see his son start off his Starfleet career in a place that mattered.

The truth was that Bobbie didn't mind getting a head start in life and it wouldn't have been the first time that the old man had helped him out along the way. While he hadn't exactly inherited the legendary captain's ambitions and command presence or even his academic acumen, he made up for it with good-looks, enthusiasm and joie de vivre.

The same could apparently not be said for his lunch companion Wayne Daystrom with whom he shared a table with in the mess hall along with the ship's Selay doctor Ssesar-Rass.

"You need to lighten up, dude," he said to the dark-skinned science officer with the serious expression on his face. It occurred to Bobbie that he couldn't remember having seen the science officer smile once since they had first met just a few weeks earlier on their journey to their current assignment. The young, broad-shouldered man was far too serious for his liking and yet the two of them had bonded early on. "You've been made chief science officer on Starfleet's newest ship and one look at you and people would think that your parents just died."

The doctor's eyes blinked rapidly and then she aimed a seemingly befuddled look at Daystrom. "Your life-bringers have passed away? I offer my sincere condolences."

Bobbie smirked. "An expression, Sses, that's all."

The reptilian looked lost.

"My parents are fine."

She turned her cobra-like head back and forth between the two officers. "My apologies. I am still familiarizing myself with human expressions."

"No worries," said DeSoto. "For the first of your kind to ever join Starfleet you're doing a pretty decent job."

She gave him a barely perceivable nod in response.

"Unless of course you consider my dad," said Daystrom without making eye contact with anyone at the table. "Last week he got lost in the town he has lived in for the last twenty years. Nobody is saying it but it could very well be the early signs of dementia."

Bobbie considered his new friend for a moment. "Your dad is a busy researcher, right? Doing a lot of important work—"

"Unlike me," mumbled the science officer.

"He's got a lot on his plate, I'm sure. Sometimes people like that just forget about the routine stuff. Back me up here, Sses."

The reptilian woman nodded. "Mister DeSoto is correct."

"Sses, we talked about this. Mister DeSoto is my old man. I'm Bobby."

"Bobby is correct," she said, starting over. "Temporary short-term memory loss is not uncommon in many humanoid races, especially amongst individuals who neglect balanced nutrition or sleep cycles which may lead to a heightened state of psychological stress. Of course the term stress itself is a highly subjective—"

Bobbie held up his hand. "I think you made your point there. Tell me did they feed you dictionaries as children or does all that come naturally?"

Ssesar was about to respond but the young helmsman beat her to it. "Never mind, don't answer that," he said and then looked back at Wayne. "Point being that just because your old man forgets something from time to time, doesn't mean he's going to end up like your great-grandfather did."

"I do not understand," the ship's CMO said. "Doctor Richard Daystrom was a highly regarded and influential scientist."

"Yeah, well, people like to focus on his genius and gloss over the fact that he was a total mental case," the younger Daystrom said.

"Wayne here is obsessed that eventually the Daystrom curse will come after him," Bobbie said with a playful grin.

Ssesar nodded. "I understand. Certain psychological diseases can be hereditary."

At that Wayne looked up with a startled expression on his face.

"Not helping," Bobbie hissed.

"However ... however not all disorders linked to the human brain are due to genetic factors and oftentimes do not reappear in subsequent generations," she said quickly, apparently having realized the error of her correct yet inappropriate observation.

"You need to stop focusing on the past and start looking ahead," he said but then got sidetracked by a pretty, blond-haired lieutenant in a red-trimmed Starfleet uniform walking by their table and towards the replicators.

"Or in your case, at the ladies," said Daystrom without much humor.

"Huh?" he said looking back at the science officer. "What, Allenby? It's not like that at all," he said quickly. "She's way to prim and proper for me. Besides, her sense of humor makes our good doctor look like a stand-up comedian," he added and picked up a padd from the table, tapping away on it. "Allow me to demonstrate. I guarantee this will lighten your mood."

The two officers observed the ensign working on his padd and then looking over his shoulder to observe Tess Allenby who had just stepped up to the replicator to fetch her lunch.

Her meal materialized and she picked it up without giving it as much as a glance. This turned out to be a big mistake because that plate did not contain the chicken salad she had ordered but something very much alive and wriggling.

Allenby uttered a surprised shriek and flung the plate back into the replicator alcove, quickly garnering her surprised looks from the entire mess hall followed by a number of amused chuckles.

Bobbie DeSoto himself had to struggle to keep from bursting out with laughter, not having expected such a terrific reaction from his little prank and even Daystrom had a tiny smirk on his face for once.

"Was that hilarious or what?" Bobbie said after he had turned back to his companions.

"Is Lieutenant Allenby's misfortune with the replicator a source of amusement?" asked the doctor with an unsure facial expression etched on her reptilian features, her head slightly skewed to the side.

"It's called humor, Sses. Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it eventually," Bobbie said.

"Let's see how funny she thinks that was," said Daystrom quickly redirecting his glance towards DeSoto after having looked past his shoulder.

"Don't tell me."

He gave him a quick nod. "Six o'clock and coming in furious."

"Act natural," he whispered.

Furious had not been an exaggeration. She slapped the plate with seemingly live Klingon *gagh* onto the table and right in front of Bobbie. "Don't even try to deny it, Ensign. I know it was you."

He looked up at her with the best innocent expression he could muster. "Me?" he said and put a hand on his chest for dramatic effect.

"I've had it with this crap of yours. Hear me on this: You've finally gone too far. This time I make sure I have you written up and officially reprimanded. Enjoy the rest of your meal, Ensign, it'll be your last on this ship," she said and stormed off.

Bobby rolled his eyes dramatically and then stood. "Tess, come on," he called after her.

She raised a hand into the air, indicating that she was not interested in whatever else he had to say, certainly didn't stop or turn around for him as she continued towards the exit.

"It was just a harmless little joke, Lieutenant," he added and then quickly followed her out of the mess hall in a seemingly futile attempt to calm her fury.

Sessar-Rass looked after them both until they had disappeared. "Is this an example of a human mating ritual?"

At that Wayne Daystrom actually laughed out loud. "You know what? You may be on to something there."

The doctor nodded and then found the plate Allenby had dumped onto the table. She pulled it in front of her and then picked up the wriggling worms in between two claw-like fingers.

Daystrom looked on with barely hidden revulsion as she dropped the *gagh* into her mouth, chewed and swallowed.

"I am not certain why Lieutenant Allenby was so upset," she said and dug into the plate once more. "This has a very agreeable taste."

5

Agamemnon, 2372

She had been deluding herself for far too long.

She had stubbornly maintained that she had been perfectly happy in her old job and that the last thing she'd ever want to do was command a starship. And for seemingly good reason. As the first officer of Deep Space Five one of her tasks had been to face starship captains on an almost daily basis and most of the time they were either unrealistically demanding or insufferably arrogant. Sometimes both at the same time.

Why then would she ever want to join those ranks and see herself transformed into a person who seemed to believe the galaxy revolved her?

Because, put simply, it was the greatest feeling in the world.

She had been unexpectedly given command of the *Agamemnon* less than a week ago and she was still riding a high of excitement and anxiety. She truly felt as if the galaxy revolved around her now but at the same time she was determined to not let it change her. She'd be damned if she turned into an insufferable, arrogant starship commander who would give a mere starbase administrator sleepless nights.

This was her dream come true and she would not let it turn into anybody's nightmare, not if she could help it.

She smiled at the various crewmembers she passed by as she walked down the corridors of this newly commissioned starship.

All of them wearing the predominately black jumpsuits with a gray turtleneck and colored shoulder sections to denote their department. As an officer previously based on a starbase she had worn this uniform variation for years but they had only been recently introduced to starship crews as well. From what she had heard they were not very popular and Maya wouldn't have been surprised if Starfleet were to introduce a new uniform style soon.

She tried to put a name to every face she saw but soon realized that with a crew of 555 individuals that would be a challenging task, no matter how much time she had spent going over the ship's personnel record. She had done her best to memorize the names of the 65 officers on the ship and most of the NCOs. That left her with scores of enlisted crewmembers and civilians. She wouldn't give up on trying to know each face even if routine crew rotations made it unlikely she'd ever be able to know them all.

It hadn't helped that she'd had extremely limited input into selecting her crew. The *Agamemnon* had rolled off the Atlas V Fleet Yard less than three months ago and a short time later, Captain Robert Jamison had been installed as her commander who had made most of the personnel choices. Ultimately the eighty-year old veteran captain had made the decision to retire from active duty when he had suffered an aneurism just weeks before the official change of command ceremony, leaving *Agamemnon* fully staffed but without a captain.

Donners wasn't entirely sure how her name had come up for the position but she had a suspicion that Admiral Jonathan Owens and Samson Glover had somehow been involved. She had been Glover's adjutant for the last four years and the way he had talked —after playing a cruel yet good-natured little prank on her which had culminated in her promotion—had made it clear that he was at least partially responsible for getting her this command.

Owens' involvement had been less obvious. The father of her good friend since their Academy days and now fellow starship captain, Michael Owens, had dropped subtle hints to his intentions just a week before she had been offered *Agamemnon*. Of course at the time she had not expected anything amiss. In fact she had been rather annoyed that everybody seemed to have an opinion about her career.

Admiral Owens had been the first person outside DS5 to contact her to congratulate her on her new position and then promptly asked for her assistance in a delicate matter with which he was involved with and which he claimed to be of uttermost importance. He had not divulged any details but by the way he had presented it, she had little doubt that it was an official Starfleet order, handed out outside the usual chain of command. *Agamemnon* was to report back to Owens as soon as their current shakedown cruise was complete.

Amaya didn't see anything suspicious about this turn of events. She trusted Owens even though his secretive aura made that difficult at times.

And if he really had had a hand in her getting this command, she had nothing but gratitude for the man.

She banned those thoughts to the back of her mind as she continued her tour of the ship, something she had done every day since they had left DS5. By the end of their weeklong shakedown she was determined to know every nook and cranny of her new ship.

Her first stop: Deck 14, main engineering.

She found two of her most unique crewmembers there. Her Xindi-Insectoid chief engineer Lieutenant Commander Chen and the Selay chief medical officer, Doctor Ssestar-Rass.

Amaya wasn't surprised to find them together. They weren't the only non-humanoids in her crew but they were perhaps the ones least acclimated to working with other species. This was especially true for their CMO. She couldn't quite deny her own reservations about having a reptilian doctor overseeing the health and well being of a mostly humanoid crew, especially considering her obvious lack of experience in the matter. It turned out that Jamison had been Ssestar-Rass' sponsor to the Academy and had thought very highly of the first ever Selay to join Starfleet. The doctor possessed an innate curiosity for all things unfamiliar, which served her well in her new position, she was eager to learn and had been a skillful physician on her own world. She had also impressed her Starfleet tutors with her almost encyclopedic knowledge of human and other Federation species' anatomies and physiologies.

She was however, Maya had found, a little clueless when it came to social interactions with the crew. All in all, she found her rather endearing and Donners had every intention to give the Selay a chance to prove herself in this position.

Chen, whose full name was a lot longer and a lot less easy to pronounce was quite a different story. Even more so than the green-scaled reptilian, it took a little getting used to seeing an over six foot tall ant-like creature in a Starfleet uniform. Amaya knew that the Xinid had a long and rich history. Marred in tragedy, the onetime Starfleet enemy had been responsible for one of the worst attacks on Earth all the way back in the 22nd century. And while that period of history wasn't exactly her strong suit, she understood that the Xinid had been a somewhat nomadic people after those events and rarely made contact with the outside world.

Chen was different. Like Rass he was very much an explorer. At only 13 years, he was already a Starfleet veteran, having spent almost 10 years

on various assignments before landing on the *Agamemnon*. As such he had an easier time getting along with his more humanoid colleagues and had taken the Selay doctor under his wing, trying to impart her with the same lessons he had learned about interspecies relations over time.

“Good Morning, Commander. Doctor. How is my ship and crew today?” she said as she approached the two officers.

They turned to face her. “Captain,” said Chen in greeting. “You will be happy to learn that the engines continue to perform at 98% efficiency after seventy-nine hours at warp eight point five. Antimatter containment remains stable and main EPS flow is well within standard parameters.”

“Excellent,” she said and stepped closer to the centrally located matter/anti-matter reaction chamber and the large magnetic constriction segments with their swirling blue pulses which to her looked almost mesmerizing. She placed her hands on the bright red railing surrounding the warp core pit and let her gaze wander upwards and along the pulsating blue column. “I’ve been reading great things about this class-nine warp drive,” she said. “I understand it has a tricyclic input manifold and produces a maximum output of four thousand teradynes per second,” the captain added and then glanced at the chief engineer. “Should give us what? Warp 9.972 in a crunch?”

Chen seemed surprised or perhaps impressed by the way his feelers and mandibles twitched slightly. “Actually, the drive is rated for 9.975. It is not a speed I would recommend however.”

She nodded. “Trust me, I’m not planning to take her that fast unless I absolutely have to,” she said and looked over a console attached to the railing. “The warp coils now use specially refined verterium cortenide made up of monocrystal cortenum. I hear the folks at the starship design bureau are hoping that this will lessen the environmental impact high warp speeds will have on subspace.”

“That ... is correct,” said Chen.

She aimed a big smile at him. “Used to be an engineer myself,” she said. “And you know what they say: Once an engineer, always an engineer.”

“I was not aware people said this.”

Maya glanced back towards the warp core assembly. “Of course this makes that old class-seven drive I looked after on the *Columbia* look like an antique in comparison. When do you think we can conclude the engine stress test?”

"I recommend that we maintain current cochrane levels for another six hours."

"Good," she said. "Going this fast for this long is starting to make me a little dizzy."

The doctor focused on the captain with apparent concern. "You may be experiencing symptoms of motion sickness which has been observed in many space-faring species after prolonged exposure to high warp. There are a number of remedies I can recommend which—"

"Doctor," she interrupted the Selay in a hushed tone. "I assure you I am not suffering from space sickness and I would prefer if you kept your voice down. The last thing I need is a rumor to spread among the crew that their captain gets queasy whenever we go to warp."

Ssestar blinked rapidly. "Humblest of apologies, Captain," she responded in an equally low tone of voice. "I did not wish to imply that you are unfit for duty in any capacity."

Maya smirked. It wasn't difficult to read Rass' embarrassment and if Chen's antennae behaved similarly to those of Andorians, she guessed that he was concerned about the good doctor as he focused in on her, no doubt thinking that his lessons in the finer nuances of human humor had not yet paid off.

"Relax, Doctor, I was merely joking. What's the status of the crew?"

It took Rass a moment to understand that the captain had not been serious and that the conversation had now been steered into a different direction. "I have completed mandatory medical examinations for the majority of the crew and have found it overall in good health. I have observed some hesitation by a small number of individuals to voluntarily undergo their physicals."

The captain nodded. "You will find that some people are not particularly comfortable around doctors. They may need a little bit extra prodding to get them on a bio-bed. I trust it's nothing you cannot handle."

"I suspect that some persons have been reluctant to be examined by a non-humanoid physician. My support staff has been very helpful in addressing these issues," she said.

"Good," Donners said. "Give the crew some time to get used to having you as their doctor. But if you encounter any more problems bring them to my attention. I expect crewmembers to fully cooperate with you just like they would with any other CMO."

Rass inclined her head slightly in an approximation of a nod. "I will, Captain. Thank you."

She gave them both a parting smile. "Carry on," she said before she turned and left engineering.

"Now, remember what I said about human tendencies to make facetious remarks in unexpected situations?" said Chen after the captain had left.

"I recall. This is not the first time I have made this mistake today. I find it challenging to distinguish a serious comment from a jovial one. How can you ever be certain?"

Chen's antennae twitched slightly and his large black compound eyes took a moment to focus on the doctor. "In my experience I have found that sometimes all you can do is to make a guess of it."

* * *

After engineering her next stop was the deck below which among other things contained the security chief's office, the armory and the brig.

She overheard the loud voices the moment she had stepped into the security department.

"I cannot understand how you can possibly dispute the outcome of the exercise, Lieutenant. It has to be obvious even to you that we won that engagement."

"If by won you mean getting yourself almost disemboweled, I'd agree."

"That's because you cheated."

"Lieutenant, I have thick plumage and I can almost put up with all the nonsense you've been throwing my way lately but for your own benefit I urge you never to say that again."

Amaya's bemused smile which she had maintained pretty much since leaving engineering quickly turned into an ugly frown when she spotted her Aurelian chief of security loudly arguing with Marines commander Beatiar Sh'Fane and in front of an audience of half a dozen security officers no less.

"I don't know how else to put it, Lieutenant. I had you dead to rights when you simply—"

The Andorian stopped herself in mid-sentence. Not because of the avian security chief whose wings had begun to unfurl in a sign increasing anger and frustration but because she had spotted Donners step up to them.

“Captain on deck!” she barked and immediately stood at attention.

Mer’iab and his security officers followed suit half a second later.

Amaya wasn’t exactly used to this reaction to her presence. Starfleet no longer followed such strict military rituals on a regular basis but the same apparently wasn’t true for the Marines. And the chief of security had most likely followed along instinctively, not wanting to seem disrespectful in front of his new commanding officer. Maya felt that the avian was a little stiff but then she hadn’t come across many security officers who weren’t. But it concerned her that she had yet to see Mer’iab crack so much as a smile which admittedly she wasn’t sure he was capable of considering that large beak adorning his face. She hadn’t heard him make a single joke or witty comment to hint towards any sense of humor at all. Maya had always felt that a good Starfleet officer had to have at least a little bit of a funny side. Men and women who took themselves too seriously were not just difficult to work with, they could be downright dangerous.

As she considered the two officers standing at attention in front of her she realized that good humor was likely the last thing that ever crossed their minds. Then she realized that nobody in the room would move until she told them so. “At ease,” she finally said and immediately seven boots stomped the floor in unison as everyone stood at parade rest.

“Is there a problem here, Lieutenant?” she said, addressing Mer’iab.

“No problem, sir.”

She looked him over suspiciously. He didn’t make eye contact with her and instead kept his gaze perfectly straight, aimed at the wall behind her. Maya found this slightly unsettling.

She turned to the Andorian in the Marines uniform. “Is that right?”

Sh’Fane nodded sharply. “The Lieutenant is correct, ma’am. There is no problem.”

Maya looked back and forth between the two officers. “See now, I find that hard to believe considering the rather loud and public conversation I just walked into.”

At that the tall avian with the amber plumage made eye contact with her for the first time. His prominent beak made it difficult for her to read his facial expressions but those intense blue eyes did appear slightly

discomfited. "I offer my apologies, sir. We were having a professional disagreement and we probably should have had it behind closed doors."

"I agree. Let's do that right now, shall we?" she said and pointed at his office. "Everybody else, carry on."

Within moments Mer'iab, Sh'Fane and Donners had stepped into the adjacent office just about large enough to comfortably accommodate the three of them. Nobody made any move towards one of the three chairs.

"Okay then, let's have it. What's going on?"

Neither of them seemed to want to go first.

"Let me get this straight. Your captain asks you a simple question and you both decide to give me the silent treatment?"

The two of them looked at each other, clearly uncomfortable with the position they had been put into. Maya thought she understood. They had no qualms about uttering their grievances to each other like the warriors they both were but it was an entirely different matter to escalate their problems to their commanding officer and thereby implying that they were not able to deal with their own issues.

"Sir, I believe it is a matter which we can resolve ourselves," Mer'iab finally said.

Maya shook her head. "I'm not sure I agree. If two of my senior officers feel the need to yell at each other in front of the crew, I'd much rather make it my business. Call me nosey, if you want," she said and then quickly reminded herself that she was beginning to sound like one of those arrogant starship captains.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Whatever it takes, Lieutenant."

"Lieutenant Sh'Fane and I disagree on the best manner in which to utilize her people on *Agamemnon*," Mer'iab said. "As the chief of security on this ship I believe it falls under my authority to oversee all security related matters on board as it is outlined in Starfleet regs. The Lieutenant appears to have a different interpretation of those regulations."

"Permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

Maya rolled her eyes dramatically. "Please, don't hold anything back."

"We are on board *Agamemnon* because Starfleet is considering assigning detachments of Marines on every ship of the line. As the Lieutenant is fully aware my men are part of an important pilot project to gauge the effectiveness of a well-trained and combat ready team of

Marines on a starship. However if the Lieutenant feels it necessary to exclude us from security duties on board, this entire project becomes redundant.”

Maya leaned against the desk and uttered a little sigh and maybe realizing for the first time that being a starship captain would come with its own set of challenges and difficulties, even if they appeared entirely silly to her ears.

She had only recently learned about Sh’Fane and her company of 87 Marines which had been assigned to *Agamemnon* as a pilot project. Apparently somebody in the upper echelons of Starfleet had felt that this was potentially a great idea in the face of the seemingly greater dangers starships now faced. The *Akira*-class had been considered the perfect test bed for this project. With its impressive offensive capabilities it was already likened to something akin to a battleship even though Amaya Donners took objection to that term.

Agamemnon was a heavy cruiser which happened to be well armed but nowhere in her mission specifications did it state that she was a dedicated vessel of war. Regardless how she felt about this, it had made sense to somebody to give her a regiment of combat-trained Marines.

However it seemed nobody had considered how this would go over with the ship’s already existing security detachment.

“Alright, the way I see it, Lieutenant Sh’Fane has a valid point about having to be involved in ship security matters,” she said and then continued just as Mer’iab tried to speak up to object. “However I would expect the chief of security to determine in which way or form this would happen.”

“Ma’am, with all due respect, if it remains up to Lieutenant Mer’iab, my men and I will do nothing but twiddle our thumbs all day,” the Andorian said. “That’s not what we signed up for.”

Maya nodded to acknowledge the problem.

“Sir, I have no objections to the Marines being on board but the truth is that they are not required for any routine operation. Their strength lies in special operations such as boarding missions or repelling intruders. Otherwise my people are perfectly capable to carry out their duties without any further assistance.”

Sh’Fane gave the captain an insisting look as if to emphasize her issues with Mer’iab’s attitude.

Maya didn't know either one of these officers well enough yet to know if they were being entirely straightforward with her and she halfway suspected that they were holding back their true feelings in front of their new commanding officer. She decided that it would take some time to potentially get to the root of the problem. "Lieutenant," she said, addressing her security chief, "find ways to incorporate the Marines in routine security duties. I don't expect them to take over but I want to see a healthy ratio involved in ship duties. Above all, I want you both to demonstrate to me that you can work together. I also want it to be clear that if you guys can't pull this off, it will reflect poorly on the both of you, is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Understood," Mer'iab said with what appeared to be very limited enthusiasm.

"And the next time you have a disagreement, take it in here, will you?"

They responded with curt nods which Maya felt displayed the appropriate amount of humility. "Very good. Carry on then," she said and left the office.

* * *

She had managed to recoup her feel-good attitude shortly after she had left the security department behind. Yes, she had been annoyed by the fact that two of her senior officers clearly didn't get along even though it was essential that they worked together, but at the same time she couldn't help but feel that this would be an extremely boring captaincy if everything just worked perfectly right out of the gate.

It was going to be up to her to mold this crew into an effective unit and it was a challenge she looked forward to, road bumps and all.

She decided to check in on one more department before making her way back to her ready room for a well-deserved cup of hot and spicy *raktajino*.

Deck 4: Primary Science Lab.

Agamemnon's offensive capabilities came at the price of a much more limited scientific scope. Still the ship was equipped with six science and research labs and a dedicated stellar cartography section and possessed a full set of sensitive sensor equipment.

She found the man in charge of all this working by himself at a computer station tucked in the corner of *Agamemnon's* largest science lab.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Wayne Daystrom defied the stereotype of what a scientist was supposed to look like. The tall and muscular young man would not have looked out of place as one of Mer'iab's security officers or even in a Marines' uniform but instead he had followed a time-honored and prestigious family tradition by pursuing a career in the sciences.

Maya felt a certain kinship to Daystrom. It had not been difficult to notice that the man felt at least slightly ambiguous about his position which she attributed to his insecurity of being put in charge of an entire department on a starship at a relatively young age. She couldn't deny that she was plagued by similar feelings about her nascent captaincy.

Daystrom's shoulders were slumped as he slowly typed into his workstation while referring to a padd he held in his other hand every few moments. He did not notice the captain enter. The light levels had been dimmed significantly.

"I may have to check with Doctor Rass to be sure but I can't imagine this is good for your eyes," she said as she approached the science officer.

He turned to look at her and his entire posture changed dramatically. Not the same way as the security officers had earlier. He didn't jump to attention like a first year recruit but instead he stood, straightened his shoulders and offered a warm smile. "Captain."

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't mean to interrupt your work."

He quickly waved it off. "It's nothing important, sir."

She did not miss that the smile never quite reached his eyes. "How are you doing, Wayne? You settling in alright?"

"Yes, thank you for asking. And I'm happy to report that all sensors are working at optimal efficiency. The navigational deflector and the long range sensors will need a bit of fine-tuning still but otherwise the boys and girls at Atlas V really did a great job with her."

"That's certainly good to hear."

A short and awkward pause ensued between them and Amaya felt as if other matters were on the young man's mind which he may not have wanted to share with his captain. She decided that she wanted things out in the open. It seemed to have worked with Mer'iab and Sh'Fane. Or at least she hoped it had.

"Take a seat, Wayne," she said.

Daystrom sat back down and Amaya took the chair at the adjacent workstation. "I've been watching you over the last few days and I get the distinct feeling something is troubling you. Want to talk about it?"

"It's nothing, sir."

"Do you mind if I'm the judge of that?"

He seemed to consider his next words very carefully which Maya always thought of as a bad sign. "It's this assignment. Please believe me when I say that I don't want to sound ungrateful and that I consider it a tremendous honor to be serving under you."

"I hear the but coming," she said.

"I'm not really sure how to explain it. All my life people have had the tendency to compare me to my great-grandfather. I suppose I look a little like him and I certainly inherited not just his size but also his fascination with research and the sciences. People have come to expect that I'll be just like him someday, follow in his footsteps as it were as some sort of scientific prodigy. How many prodigies do you know who serve as a science officer on a battleship?" he said, sounding embarrassed as the words came over his lips.

She cringed slightly. "First of all, *Agamemnon* isn't a battleship and I don't want you to pay attention to anyone who tries to tell you otherwise."

"Yes, sir."

"As for your concerns about measuring up to people's expectations, well that's a lit bit trickier. All I can really say is that I have found it much healthier when you stop worrying what people may expect from you and instead focus on what's important to yourself. You are not Richard Daystrom. You are your own man with your own path. And that path has led you to become the chief science officer on a ship of the line which, if I may say so, is no small feat.

You are just at the beginning of your career, Wayne. You may find that you enjoy doing this for a long time to come or maybe you find that you'd rather be a dedicated researcher like your great-grandfather was. Give it some time before you start obsessing about not measuring up to one of the greatest minds in Federation history."

Daystrom's smile widened and Maya thought that this time it was genuine. "You're right," he said. "I'm sorry, I knew I was being silly but hearing it from you, I think you put things in perspective for me. Thank you, Captain."

She got up and returned his smile when he immediately left his chair as well like the gentleman he was. She gave him a friendly clap on his upper arm. "I was glad to help. And if you ever want to talk, you know where to find me."

He nodded gratefully and she turned to head for the exit.

She stopped before reaching the doors to shoot him one last look. He had sat back down and returned to work on whatever he had been occupied with before. She noticed that his shoulders were slumped again and that his facial expression had returned to the dour look he'd worn when she had first entered the lab.

Maya doubted that her little prep talk had been sufficient to make the young man forget all about his admittedly complex trepidations. It had been a good start, she decided before leaving the lab for good.

* * *

Truth be told she really looked forward to that hot cup of *raktajino* after her daily tour of the ship had concluded. She sensed that one more challenge awaited her when she found Lieutenant Tess Allenby outside of her ready room as soon as she stepped onto the bridge.

"Captain, may I have a word?" the blond-haired woman asked with little delay. By the tone of her voice it was obvious that she was agitated and that she wanted to have this conversation in private.

"Of course, Lieutenant," she said and led her into her spacious ready room. "Would you care for a drink?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

As much as she wanted to sip on spicy Klingon coffee, Donners decided against indulging in a hot beverage while dealing with a clearly distressed senior officer. She was detecting a troublesome theme however.

She took a seat behind her desk and gestured for the lieutenant to sit in the chair opposite hers but Allenby politely refused yet again.

"I need to speak to you about Ensign DeSoto, sir. His behavior is completely inappropriate and I'm convinced it has come to a point where perhaps re-assignment is not entirely out of the question."

Donners fixed the young woman with a surprised look. "Yours or his?"

“His, of course.”

“Of course.”

She began to pace the length of the office. “I assure you I wouldn’t bring something like this to your attention unless I felt it was absolutely necessary. I hate the idea of having to escalate a personnel issue in this manner but the man—and I’m using the term very loosely here as he behaves more like a boy than a man—has left me no other choice. God knows I’ve been trying to put up with it but I have my limits.”

“I see. Would you mind stop moving—”

“You have to believe me that I’ve tried everything I could to resolve this matter without having to make it official. I’ve tried speaking to him on numerous occasions but to be perfectly honest, it’s like talking to a ten-year old. He just doesn’t want to listen. This is not a behavior appropriate for a Starfleet officer,” she went on as if Donners hadn’t spoken at all and continued to pace.

Maya tried to hide her irritation. “I just need you to calm down and stop—”

“I don’t want you to think that I’m the kind of person who enjoys badmouthing other officers behind their backs, because I’m really not. I just want to be able to carry out my duties to the best of my abilities. Something that is becoming increasingly difficult with somebody like Ensign DeSoto playing these stupid—”

A loud hiss finally achieved what Donners hadn’t been able to and Allenby stopped in her tracks and turned around to see a vicious-looking wildcat bearing down on her, his head lowered and peering up at her as if getting ready to pounce any second.

The green and yellow *le-matya* looked more than strong enough to jump the lithe woman and rip her apart limb from limb before she could even think of trying to defend herself. She began to back paddle with her eyes wide open in shock.

“What I’ve been trying to tell you, Lieutenant, is that Cosmo gets grumpy when people raise their voice in my office and try to wear down the carpet. And by the way, I don’t care for it either,” said Donners with a smile which made it difficult to judge if she was being serious or not. The sincerity of the three hundred pound wildcat however was not in question.

“I ... I’m sorry,” she stammered, keeping her eyes on the advancing animal now showing off a set of impressive and razor-sharp teeth as well as gleaming claws.

“Cosmo, be a good boy and leave the lieutenant alone,” said Donners casually. The *le-matya* stopped and then turned his head to look back at his mistress. “We talked about this. No hissing in my ready room.”

Cosmo aimed one last look at the lieutenant before he retracted his claws and trotted towards his favorite spot right by the window where he laid down with his head on top of his paws, appearing almost pouty by not being allowed to play.

Donners shrugged. “He may be smart but he’s also still an animal and it’s tough for him to ignore those instincts. Don’t worry he hasn’t actually attacked anyone in years.”

Allenby nodded slowly, clearly not entirely convinced.

“Now where were we?” she said with renewed cheer. “Ah yes, you were ranting about Mister DeSoto while completely ignoring me.”

“I’m so sorry, sir.”

“Forgive and forget,” she said. “Now, sit down and let’s start again.”

This time she took that seat.

“I understand that Bobbie can be a little immature at times but suggesting that he should be re-assigned is a little extreme. Not to mention that I wouldn’t want to be the person breaking the news to his father,” said Maya.

“With all due respect to his family, DeSoto Junior is not fit to be a Starfleet officer and he’d be the first one to tell you that he doesn’t have a care in the world about the exemplary legacy that his father and his grandfather have built.”

Maya couldn’t help but think about Wayne Daystrom. Similar background, entirely different set of issues. “Why do you feel he is not fit for Starfleet?”

“Because he has no discipline, sir.”

“Has this anything to do with his tendency to play practical jokes?” she said with a knowing grin which she quickly dropped when she realized that Allenby was not amused.

“They are way out of line, sir, and for whatever reason I have been singled out. Today he had the replicator produce a plate of *gagh* for my lunch and two days ago he reprogrammed my sonic shower to only produce water. Have you ever been soaked from head to toe in hot water? It’s disgusting.”

“You’ll be surprised to learn that for a long time that’s how humans tended to take their showers.”

“People also tended to slaughter animals for food. It’s barbaric,” she said.

Amaya suppressed her urge to roll her eyes. She could tell why Bobby DeSoto had singled out Allenby, she must have made for a mighty inviting target. Sure, she couldn’t condone his actions, at least not officially, but she could certainly understand them. And if this had been the Academy she would even have considered it well-practiced routine. You play a prank on a fellow cadet and they’ll get you back eventually.

But she was also fully cognizant that this wasn’t the Academy and her operations manager, as stuck up as she may have appeared, had every right to be free from fear to be hazed by a fellow officer.

“I think re-assignment may be a punishment unbecoming the crime.”

“Due respect, Captain, I’m not so sure.”

Maya shot her a look that left no room to interpret her resolve in the matter. “I am and that will have to be sufficient for you.”

She nodded quickly in response. “Yes, sir.”

“Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Lieutenant. Rest assured that it will be addressed.”

She got the hint that this conversation was over and stood. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Dismissed.”

Allenby left the ready room and Donners couldn’t help feeling that perhaps some crew issues were best left in the hands of her first officer. She had enjoyed being a hands-on captain and having the ear of the crew over the last few days and she had no intentions of changing this approach anytime soon but it was her prerogative to delegate when she felt it necessary. The Bobbie DeSoto/Tess Allenby feud clearly fell into that category.

Just like Mer’iab and Sh’Fane she needed these officers to work together and respect each other and right now at least the latter did not seem to be the case. She made a mental note to discuss the matter with Arden Texx once they would meet for their daily catch-up session and then stood to head for the replicator.

“I think I’ve earned my *raktajino* now,” she said.

Cosmo wordlessly agreed by raising his head.

6

Lexington, 2267

Bob Wesley possessed the kind of steely, focused gaze that had led some on *Lexington* to believe that he was somehow able to pierce right through the dark void of space on the view screen and determine what lay ahead for him and his crew long before the ship's sensors were able to pick up on it. The more rational minded officers on the bridge attributed this seemingly uncanny ability to his long experience as a starship commander instead of on any kind of supernatural senses.

And it was exactly that kind of gaze with which he appraised the viewer at the moment. Leaning slightly forward in his high-backed captain's chair, his elbow resting on the armrest and his hand holding his chin with his eyes seemingly in total focus.

"Ms. Bathory, lower our speed to warp factor four," he said with no apparent impetus other than perhaps a captain's intuition.

The young ensign at the helm reacted quickly. "Slowing down to warp factor four," she said and manipulated her board to decelerate the six hundred thousand metric ton *Constitution*-class starship. Not a moment later the deck plates began to hum slightly as the ship slowed.

Ketteract uttered a not so subtle moan at Wesley's decision to put on the brakes. As far as he was concerned it was yet another unnecessary delay to getting him closer to perhaps one of the most significant scientific discovery of the decade.

Kuznetsov, who had more than earned himself the nickname the Bear over his Starfleet career shot the impatient scientist a stern look, letting him know that his input was neither required nor appreciated. Then he turned towards the science console. "Commander, what do we know about this sector of space?"

Having expected this line of inquiry ever since they had started out on their present course, the Andorian science officer was well prepared. "Beyond Starbase 10, the Gamma Hydra sector is very sparsely populated.

There are a limited number of class-M planets in the region and the vicinity to the Romulan Neutral Zone is not exactly a driver for colonization. It is also the home of GRS 2127-341, a former star system containing one of the largest known black holes in the quadrant," she said and pressed a number of buttons, activating one of her overhead screens to display an angry mass of pitch blackness, perfectly spherical it absorbed every ray of light that came in contact with it. The effect was so complete, it appeared as if somebody had ripped a piece right out of the cosmos. "The Iota Crucis system, our destination, is less than one light year from GRS 2127-341 which means we may soon be exposed to its gravitational effects."

The Bear looked at the dark mass on the screen with a concerned look. "What kind of effects are we talking about here exactly?"

"Our ride might become a little bumpy but otherwise we should be fine," she said.

"Deflectors to full," Wesley said.

"Aye, deflectors to full," said Lawford. "I am now reading disturbances in subspace directly within our flight path."

The science officer checked her sensors and her face quickly turned into a frown before she began to shake her head. "Something isn't right, this doesn't look like—"

And then *Lexington* hit a sandbank.

Or at least that was what it felt like for the crew as the bridge suddenly pitched forward without warning. It wasn't quite as bad as the shockwave hours earlier but it was enough to nearly throw the unprepared Ketteract over the railing and force everyone else to hold on for dear life.

"*Bozhe moi!*" the first officer swore after the deck had righted itself once more and then shot the science officer a dark look. "A little more bumpy? Are you serious?"

"Somebody ... somebody needs to install seatbelts on the bridge," Ketteract moaned as he picked himself up from the floor, his face looked pale as if he was about to be sick again.

Zha'Thara was back at her station in a flash. "This is not gravitational disturbance caused by the black hole," she said. "This is ..." she didn't appear to have immediate words for it.

Wesley focused in on his helmswoman and navigator who needed a second longer to get back into their seats. "Status?"

"Whatever we just hit," said Bathory. "It threw us clean out of warp. If we had hit this thing at full speed and without deflectors..."

"They'd scrub us off the bulkheads," finished Lawford for her and gave her a knowing look before he turned to face the commodore, wordlessly thanking him for his foresight.

Wesley toggled the armrest imbedded communicator. "Bridge to engineering. Damage report."

"What in the name of all the harlots in Orion's Belt are you people doing up there? If you are so determined to destroy my engines, why don't you come down here and shred them to pieces with a phaser. It would get ya the same results."

"I assure you Commander, we're not trying to destroy your engines on purpose. Now take a deep breath and tell me how things look down there," said Wesley, having long since gotten used to the unique Tellarite temperament, he had expected this kind of outburst and took it in stride.

The momentarily silence over the channel gave proof that Wesley's words had been taken to heart. *"We got some blown conduits and a minor coolant leak down here from the sudden stress you put on my engines. If you had a complete imbecile as a chief engineer you'd probably look at a warp core breach within the next few minutes. Fortunately for you I know what I'm doing. Jury still out on the rest of my people though,"* he said and then followed this up with a few choice shouts directed at an unlucky engineer who apparently wasn't moving as fast as he would have liked.

"Sounds to me like you've got a handle on your people just fine. When can I get engines back?"

"If you stop wasting my time with pointless chitchat, I'd say within forty-five minutes."

"Consider our chitchat stopped. Wesley out," he said and closed the channel.

"Sir, even once we get engines back, I don't think we can risk going any faster than warp factor three. Maybe three point four but any faster and we might see a repeat of what just happened," the navigator said.

The commodore nodded. "And I certainly don't need G'arv to yell at me twice in one day. We'll take it slow," he said and swiveled around towards Zha'Thara. "So if this wasn't gravitational disturbances from the black hole, what exactly did we hit?"

The Andorian took a step towards the railing. "The best I can tell is that the entire area of subspace around us has been severely damaged. The energy readings I'm getting are similar to what we registered when we were hit by that shockwave."

"You say the shockwave did this?" the Bear asked.

"I can't tell for certain but we have to assume it is connected."

This piqued Ketteract's interest who quickly attended the science station to help himself to the sensor read-outs uninvited. "This is amazing," he said, mostly to himself as he peered through the sensor hood. "This is truly amazing. The energy levels required to cause such a corruption to subspace would be nearly immeasurable."

Wesley ignored the scientist and focused on the Andorian instead who appeared at least mildly peeved at the man hijacking her instruments. "Commander, do we still believe that the shockwave originated from the Iota Crucis system?"

"Without doubt, sir. And from what I can tell the subspace damage practically surrounds that system. Whatever caused it, it came from there."

Agamemnon, 2372

Master Chief Shane Holladay stepped up to her ready room just as Amaya Donners was leaving.

“You wished to speak with me, Captain?” he said, forgoing addressing her as ‘ma’am’ as would have been customary for a noncom addressing a female commanding officer. However Maya had made it clear to the ship’s senior NCO and quartermaster that she didn’t care for that form of address and the middle-aged Master Chief had quickly adapted.

“Chief Holly,” she said, using his preferred nickname and sounding slightly surprised at seeing him until she recalled the appointment she’d made with him earlier. “Of course, I apologize I did ask to meet with you today but it must have slipped my mind.”

He shot her a good-natured smile. “Understandable. I’m sure you have much on your plate. Shall we re-arrange?”

She quickly shook her head. “You mind if we walk and chat instead?”

“It’s my favorite way to chat, Captain. It’s effective and keeps you in shape.”

She smirked but doubted he needed the exercise, judging by his trim and muscular build which was quite impressive for his age. Maya headed for the turbolift and Holly fell into step beside her.

“Deck two, section eight,” she said and the lift set in motion.

Amaya considered Holladay for a moment. His skin was far darker than hers and his white hair and sharply cut beard were about the only physical hints that he had long since passed his 50th birthday. It also demonstrated to her that vanity was not one of his concerns which she thought to be refreshing. “I know we haven’t had much of a chance to talk,” she said as she faced him inside the lift.

“I didn’t expect you to. I have served with a number of rookie captains and their first few weeks on the job are usually the most hectic.”

"No kidding. How am I doing so far?"

He aimed an almost grandfatherly look at her. "You want my honest opinion?"

"I wouldn't ask otherwise."

He nodded. "You've been throwing yourself into work, which I think is a good thing for any officer. Most captains I've met, even those just starting out, prefer to delegate much of what you've been doing. I'm fairly impressed with your attitude but I'm concerned that you might be burning yourself out early on."

She exhaled. "And here I was thinking you were going to cut me down to size."

Holly smirked. "Wouldn't dream of doing that to my captain. Certainly not in her first week."

The turbolift reached its destination and the doors opened, allowing them both to disembark.

"I appreciate your honesty Holly and that you think I'm doing a good job. And no need to be worried; I have ways to relieve the stress of command. I don't expect to burn out just yet."

"If you ever want to take it on the phaser range or need a sparring partner, you just give me a time and a date."

"I may take you up on that offer someday."

They reached Donners' quarters and she stopped in front of the doors to face the Master Chief again.

"My father served his entire life in the Border Service. Started out as a crewman and worked himself all the way up to command his own starship," she told him. "Do you want to know the first thing he told me when I broke the news to him that I'd been promoted?"

"I would hope that he congratulated you and then cussed you out for accepting what he'd call a cushy fleet assignment instead of doing some real work as a Border Dog."

The captain gave him an astonished look.

"I've done some tours over there myself, so I know how they like to think. And they're not wrong, you know. They really do some mighty fine work which often goes underappreciated by the rest of the fleet," he said.

"I need to introduce you to my dad. You two would get along famously. What made you decide to join the regular fleet?"

He considered her for a moment before responding. "I'm getting too old to wrestle with Orion thugs on a daily basis. I thought I deserved a cushy assignment myself for my last years of service."

The twinkle in his eyes gave him away and Maya smiled. "Just for saying that I'm going to make sure you'll be the busiest man on this ship."

Holly nodded in response and she quickly understood that he wasn't unaccustomed to hard work and probably even thrived on it. Maya was convinced that he was a long way off those retirement plans he had been hinting at.

"After my parents cussed me out, as you so well put it," she continued her earlier train of thought, "they both imparted me with an important lesson about running a starship. 'Make sure you treat your NCOs right', they told me, 'and have them whip your green officers into shape.'"

"Smartest damned thing I've ever heard."

"Good. Because I'll expect you to help me mold this crew. Officers and crewmen alike. Many of them are young and inexperienced and on their first deep space mission. Some may have come to expect this to be a cushy assignment on their quest for fame and adventure. I'm giving you full authority to readjust those preconceptions. Make them work as hard as Border Dogs. Hell, harder if you can coax it out of them."

The veteran Master Chief's lips curled up into a devious little smile. "I think I'm going to like it here," he said. "There's nothing like a good challenge to get you out of bed in the morning."

* * *

"So, first week on the job. How are you settling in?"

Vej, *Agamemnon's* Ullian counselor placed a cup of sweet-smelling herbal tea on the coffee table and close to where Amaya Donners had made herself comfortable in one of her plushy lounge chairs, before he sat down in the sofa opposite her.

Vej had been the civilian counselor at Deep Space Five during her entire posting at that station and the two had become close friends over the four years they had known each other. And while a great many Starfleet officers and captains had reservations about opening up to a counselor,

Maya had found his advice and support indispensable. It gave her the opportunity to open up to somebody she trusted implicitly with all her thoughts and concerns. Most of the time it wasn't anything serious and she simply appreciated the sounding board for her own musings. On other occasions his insights helped her to make difficult decisions or overcome troubling thoughts.

Ullians of course were also skilled telepaths but just like physicians, they had a strict code about using their abilities without permission. And Vej took his code very seriously.

"I still have this surreal feeling that this is all just a dream and that I'm about to wake up on DS5 to go back to work as being the station's first officer," she said after taking a sip of her drink. "And I don't mean this in the sense that I cannot believe that I've been given my own command. I think it has to do with how things happened and how quickly. How I was Glover's attaché one morning and the captain of the *Agamemnon* the next."

He nodded. "You haven't had time to catch your breath. To take a step back and let it all sink in."

"That's right," she said. "It's been nonstop since Glover practically hoaxed me into my captaincy. It's been like a rollercoaster ride and I'm not complaining. I'm loving it," she added with a big grin on her face.

Vej responded in kind. "You know the trouble with rollercoaster rides though, right?"

"Wait a minute, they have rollercoasters on Ullius?"

He frowned at that. "How come humans always believe they have a monopoly on having a good time?"

Maya raised her hands defensively. "I guess I'm a human snob."

"Glad we agree on something."

"The problem with rollercoaster rides," she said, "is that they go up as well as down, I get that. But your analogy doesn't work. Going down on a rollercoaster is much more fun than going up," she said and looked at him suspiciously. "Are you sure you've been on a rollercoaster before?"

"You got me," he said with a sheepish look. "But analogies aside for a moment, there are ups and downs to most things. You are undoubtedly running on a high of excitement at the moment, and that's good. In fact I'm very happy for you—"

"But you're worried that once things settle down I'll crash into some sort of manic depression?"

He scowled. "I'm the counselor here. Leave the psychological buzzwords to me. That's what I get paid for."

"Oh boy, if you were hoping for a paycheck did you ever join the wrong ship."

"What I'm trying to say is that being a starship captain also means carrying a great deal of responsibilities. You have over 500 men and women on this ship looking at you for guidance and leadership and to keep them safe from the doubtlessly numerous dangers we are bound to face out here. I've seen how you've thrown yourself into work and how you're attempting to connect with your crew on a very personal level. But you will have to be prepared to make the hard choices down the line even if that means that somebody you care about could get hurt."

She considered that for a moment, taking another sip of tea and then made eye contact with Vej again. "Did anybody ever tell you that you're a regular downer? I bet you don't get many party invites."

"For your information," he said. "I'm considered to be the enfant terrible at the annual psychologist's convention."

"Is that like being the coroner at the morgue?" she said with a smirk.

He aimed a displeased look at her.

"You're not telling me anything I haven't already considered," she said in a more serious tone. "I've done my *Kobayashi Maru* no-win scenario at the Academy and I've sent people I knew and respected to their deaths in holographic simulations."

"Simulation beings the operative word there."

She sighed. "So what? You want me to keep my distance from my crew because I may have to doom anyone of them at a moment's notice, is that your advice? You want me to become one of those sourpuss captains that made me want to pull out my own hair while I was on DS5?"

He quickly shook his head. "No, not at all. In fact I tend to like your command style and I wouldn't want you to change anything about it. It's who you are. But I also want to make you aware of the responsibility which now rests solely on your shoulders. I want you to be able to deal with a difficult situation when it sneaks up on you from seemingly out of the blue without it leaving you paralyzed."

"Jeez, thanks for your vote of confidence in my abilities."

"You know that's not what I meant."

She glanced out of the windows of her quarters and at the white streaks of the stars caused by the distortion of the warp bubble

surrounding the ship. "I'd be lying if I said that it hasn't been nagging at me. Intellectually I know that I'm ready for my own command. That I can handle it and that Starfleet was right to trust me with this awesome responsibility," she said and looked at him. "But there is that tiny little voice in the back of my mind that wants to doubt all the evidence to the contrary and yell at me that I have no business being in that chair."

"Congratulations," he said, causing her to give him a somewhat perplexed look. "You're human."

"Why does that almost sound like an insult coming from your lips?"

He shrugged and gave her a playful grin.

Agamemnon, 2372

During his sixteen year Starfleet career Arden Texx had come across a great many fellow officers who had cared little for his relaxed outlook on life and duty. In fact many had doubted that his attitude would serve him well and that he would ever achieve much of anything in his career, that he would even make it past lieutenant someday.

What these people failed to realize however was that regardless of his seemingly laid back attitude, Texx took his duty very seriously. What they didn't know was that while he was out having fun during the day, joking around and seemingly letting nothing bother him on the outside, he worked twice as hard during the night, studying for tests and reading up on much more than the required texts.

It was a work ethic he had inherited from a large Bolian family in which very little was disallowed or off limits as long as you studied hard and brought home good grades.

He had put his doubters in their place when he had made Lieutenant Commander and was assigned as *Agamemnon's* first officer at just 34, knowing full well that the brass at Starfleet Command tended to look at an officer's record and accomplishments and care a lot less about their personality.

"So let me get this straight," said Texx, casually leaning against a bridge aft-station as he watched First Lieutenant Beatiar Sh'Fane working at tactical. "In order to get one over on our prickly chief of security you have pulled strings behind his back to switch gamma shift with the duty officer so you can brush up on your tactical operations skills."

The Andorian shot the man a displeased look. "I am not attempting to 'get-one-over' on anybody," she said sharply. "It is part of my mission on this ship to familiarize myself with all tactical and security systems in case my team or I are required to assist during an emergency."

"Right," he said and then stepped up to the tactical station and next to her. "It just so happens that Lure isn't aware that you're playing at his station tonight."

She took a deep breath. "Marines don't play, sir."

"They just take over somebody else's station without permission."

Sh'Fane took a step back from the console and stood at attention. "I wasn't aware I required permission, sir. If you wish me to cease my efforts I will do so at once."

"Whoa, easy there, Beat. Didn't mean to stop your efforts."

"Lieutenant."

"Beg your pardon?"

She gave him a sidelong glance. "I would prefer if you addressed me as Lieutenant. Or First Lieutenant if you wish to be precise."

"I kinda like *Be-a-tiar*, it's a really pretty name," he said with a smirk.

She kept those intense emerald-colored eyes zeroed in on him but didn't move a muscle.

Texx raised his arms in surrender. "Lieutenant it is then. Please," he said and pointed at the tactical station. "Don't let me stop you."

She promptly stepped back up to the console and continued to work on it.

"And I can assume that you know what you're doing there, right?"

The Marine responded without looking up. "I had rudimentary training in starship tactical operations at Marines Command Academy on Andor. However if you have concerns about my abilities, Ensign Goodfeather is available to take over at a moment's notice."

Texx looked around to notice the young tactical officer standing close by. Otherwise there were only two other officers on the bridge, manning operations and the helm respectively. Not at all unusual during the graveyard shift.

"I see. And I take it that the fact that you decided to come up here and dabble in Mister Mer'iab's domain has little to do with your ongoing feud with our security chief."

At that she did look up. "Marines do not feud, sir."

"Right. Other than in combat, perhaps?"

"We engage in combat in order to achieve an overall objective as outlined by our commanding officers. It has nothing to do with feuding," she said before returning her attention to the tactical station in an attempt

to discourage further conversation on the subject or any other for that matter.

It was a hopeless effort. "I stand corrected," he said. "Marines do everything on purpose, properly and without fail. Semper Fi and all that."

"That is correct, sir."

He smirked at that. "I find that fascinating."

Sh'Fane suppressed a sigh but wasn't quite able to keep a frown off her face.

Texx pretended not to notice. "I'd love to learn more about Marines. I've always found the whole concept interesting. Perhaps we could discuss it further at some point. Like, I don't know, perhaps over dinner?"

"Marines do not—"

"Have dinner? I find that hard to believe," he said. "You have to eat sometime."

She looked up at him. "Sir, am I right in assuming that you are attempting to fraternize with me, possibly suggesting some sort of romantic episode?"

Texx grin widened. "I usually start with dinner and then see where it leads."

"With all due respect, sir, I find this highly inappropriate behavior."

"No, that comes later."

The look on the Marine's face was cold as stone, her eyes practically drilling themselves through the Bolian first officer. Texx had no doubt that this death stare was meant to intimidate those poor souls under her command who had failed to perform to her expectations. It didn't quite work on him though.

"Cross a line?" he said innocently.

She nodded in response.

"In that case I apologize, Lieutenant."

"I'm willing to overlook it, sir, if you do not bring it up again," she said and went back to her station.

If she had been holding out hope that Texx would finally drop the entire conversation and move on, she was to be disappointed once more.

"I have to say though," he said, not looking at anyone as he spoke. "You are a little bit stiff, aren't you? Even for a Marine, I mean," he added and turned to look at her again. "I say this because my sister is in the Marines and she can be a real riot if she wants to be. Cuts loose like the best of them."

Sh'Fane rolled her eyes. "Your sisters' behavior is her concern."

"I'm just saying that—"

The tactical board peeped urgently, startling both Sh'Fane and Texx.

"What is it?" the first officer asked.

The Andorian looked puzzled herself as she worked the station with little success. "I am not certain, sir. Something just happened and it locked me out of the system. Then this symbol popped up."

He looked over her shoulder to see the blue character on the tactical board which resembled a broken up O with sharp edges turned outwards. "That's an old Earth letter, I believe."

"It's not just the tactical station, either."

Texx looked up and realized she was right. The symbol was now showing on a number of stations all over the bridge.

The gamma shift helmsman had turned from his station with puzzlement and looked at the first officer. "Sir, we've dropped out of warp. I cannot explain why."

"What's happening here?" Sh'Fane said but not addressing anyone in particular.

"I take it this wasn't covered at Marines Command School?"

Sh'Fane shook her head.

"It didn't come up at the Academy either," he said. "Unless I was sick that day," he added and then tried to enter a few commands into the tactical station himself with little success. "If I had to guess, I'd say the ship is trying to tell us something."

"Tell us what, sir?"

Texx shrugged. "Helm, can you override?"

The crewmember turned back to his station. "I have access to basic ship systems but not much more. Warp drive and impulse is locked down."

"Bridge to engineering," said Texx.

"*This is Ensign Saarik, please go ahead bridge,*" the voice of a female Vulcan officer responded promptly.

"This is Texx speaking. Ah, we've got a little bit of a problem up here with our instruments. Anything out of the ordinary down there with you guys?"

"*All systems are operating within required parameters, sir. We have registered an unscheduled warp shut down command from the bridge approximately twenty-two seconds ago.*"

Texx aimed a quick look at the helmsman who immediately shook his head, making it clear that he had entered no such command.

"How about your screens?" he said.

There was a momentary delay in the woman's response. "*Sir, could you be more specific?*"

"You seen any out of place lettering of any kind? Odd shapes perhaps?"

"*The computer screens appear to be operating normally, sir. If you wish I can carry out a visual inspection of every monitor within main engineering. However a level four diagnostic should be more efficient,*" she said, doing a decent job of keeping any irritation out of her carefully modulated voice.

"Go ahead and run that diagnostic, Ensign. Bridge out."

"Just us then," said Sh'Fane.

He nodded. "It would appear that way."

The turbolift doors opened to allow Amaya Donners to enter. She clearly had gotten out of bed in a hurry, wearing her uniform pants with only a gray tank top. Her long dark and curly hair had only received the most cursory treatment and her eyes still looked tired.

"Captain on the bridge," Sh'Fane barked and standing at immediate attention, causing both Donners and Texx to flinch noticeably.

Donners shot the Marine an annoyed look. "Way too early for that," she said. "And let me be clear right out of the gate, Lieutenant. Please, just don't do that ever again."

She nodded sharply and relaxed her posture.

Texx turned to Donners with a smirk on his face. "Morning, Cap. As you can see, we've got a bit of a mystery here. Didn't mean to call you up just yet. How did you hear?"

"Computer woke me," she said and then looked around the bridge, taking note of the same symbols she had seen in her quarters after being urgently woken by an automated message.

"Any idea what this is?" he said.

"Last letter of the Greek alphabet," she said. "Omega."

"Some sort of design flaw?" said Sh'Fane.

She shook her head. "No, something else," she said and stepped up to the tactical station and entered her command code. The computer immediately released the console again and unlocked all the other bridge stations as well. The Omega symbols disappeared to be replaced once more by the default screen output.

"Well that's a neat trick," Texx said. "What's this about?"

"I honestly haven't got a clue," she said just before the tactical board beeped again, this time with the telltale sound of an incoming message.

Sh'Fane quickly attended to it. "Ma'am, we're being hailed by Deep Space Five on a high priority and secure channel. Admiral Glover. For your eyes only."

"Looks like you're about to get some answers," said Texx.

Donners nodded. "Pipe it through to my ready room."

Moments later *Agamemnon's* newly appointed captain sat behind her desk, looking at the surprisingly grim visage of her former commanding officer of four years.

Perhaps his mood wasn't entirely surprising considering that he looked about as tired as she did and Maya was certain that he had been roused as unceremoniously as she had a few minutes earlier.

"Admiral," she said.

"Maya, I'm sorry to have to kick you out of bed like this but we have a situation that requires your immediate attention," he said with little preamble.

"I'm going out on a limb here and assume this is related to the Omega symbols popping up all over my bridge," she said with a little smirk.

It helped lighten the mood and Glover's serious visage cracked slightly. *"Excellent guess, Captain,"* he said and then uttered a heavy sigh. *"This is not something I would have hoped to happen to you on your first week on the job but sadly we don't always get to choose our assignments."*

"Comes with the territory."

He nodded. *"Agamemnon's sensors have detected the Omega molecule in close proximity to your vessel, automatically initiating the Omega Directive which now supersedes all other orders."*

The blank look on Donners' face showed that she had little idea what the admiral was talking about.

"I know, I know," he said. *"There hasn't been enough time yet to fully brief you on this so let me give you the rundown. I'm also transmitting to you everything you need to know about Omega for you to review afterwards. In a nutshell, the Omega molecule is one of Starfleet's dirty little secrets that we don't want anybody else to know about because, quite frankly, the powers that be are too scared of what could happen if its existence would become public knowledge."*

Maya frowned. "We're suppressing scientific knowledge?" she said. "Does the Council know about this?"

"Every last member? I sincerely doubt that. But the directive itself has been signed off at the highest levels of the administration and Starfleet Command. Maya, I'm not going to discuss with you the social or political implications of this directive because trust me, I have had this conversation more times than I would care for and it usually goes nowhere. Starfleet has zero tolerance when it comes to Omega. They'll tell you to follow the orders and shut up or kiss your Starfleet career goodbye," he said.

She took a deep breath, not quite having expected something like this so soon in her captaincy. Maya had never had any illusions that there weren't a great number of things she had never been privy to before joining the exclusive club of starship command but this sounded radical even to her ears.

"Okay, fair enough. I'm going to be a good captain and not challenge the status quo," she said. *"Now, mind telling me what Omega is and what this directive is all about?"*

"In short, the Omega molecule is the most powerful substance known to exist. I'm not going to bore you with the details, you can read up on it in your own time. Sufficient to say that it is also extremely unstable and in all likelihood will trigger a catastrophe of galactic proportions if not immediately contained," he said grimly.

"The end of the universe as we know it?" she said with a smirk.

Glover was not amused and she quickly wiped that grin off her face.

"That bad, huh?"

"Worse," he said. *"The Omega molecule could wipe-out subspace over the entire quadrant and beyond and do untold damage to regular space just as a side-effect. Every attempt to synthesize the molecule and contain it have failed. Needless to say, if anyone is trying to do so again, we need to shut them down now."*

Amaya didn't look entirely convinced even as she still tried to grasp the awesome destructive power of this molecule which hitherto she had never even heard of before.

"I appreciate that this is a lot for you to take in but as you may have realized, time is not something we have in great abundance. Starfleet Command has already been made aware of this situation and the Volta—a specialist vessel crewed with a team trained to handle an Omega molecule detection—is being sent out as we speak to deal with this," he said and looked at a padd which he kept next to his computer. *"But judging from Agamemnon's sensor reports, you are the closest ship to the source of these readings. I've already diverted Cuffe to assist you but Terrence won't get there for another forty-eight hours or so. I need you to*

set course to the Iota Crucis system at maximum warp and contain the situation to the best of your abilities until reinforcements arrive."

"And what exactly does contain the situation mean?"

"It means that you are authorized to use whatever means necessary to locate and destroy anything that resembles the Omega molecule or could be used to synthesize it. Let me be absolutely clear on this, Maya. During the course of this mission, the Omega Directive supersedes every other directive in the book. Without exception."

"Jesus Christ, Sam."

He nodded, letting her verbal faux pas slide. "As I said, Starfleet is not kidding around with this. And again, I'm sorry it had to be you."

Maya took another deep breath, trying to process everything she had learned so far. "Alright," she finally said. "I take it the information you're sending me contains everything my crew and I need to know on how to destroy these molecules."

"Yes," he said. "But you cannot share any of this with anyone else including members of your crew. This is strictly captains-only. No one below your position is authorized to be briefed on Omega."

"You cannot be serious," she said. "How do you expect me to handle this if I cannot bring my crew on board?"

Samson Glover's facial expression was clearly pained. "I know this isn't going to be easy but all I can tell you is that the Omega Directive is very clear on this. Whatever you do, you cannot talk to your crew about any of this. I'm sorry. You will have to find a way to handle this by yourself and have your people support you without knowing the why or the what. I'd be lying if I said that this was going to be easy, especially with a crew you haven't even had a chance to get to know properly as of yet but there isn't any other choice."

She was speechless.

"Just do what you can until Terrence gets there. Then you can team up and tackle this together. Please be careful and good luck. Glover out."

And with that his face disappeared from the screen, leaving Amaya Donners to stare at a blank computer monitor.

She let her glance wander around the still mostly empty and undecorated ready room, realizing that she had never felt this alone in her entire life.

Lexington, 2267

Lieutenant Commander Talana Zha'Thara stepped onto the bridge and headed straight for her science station only to find it occupied not by the science duty officer but by Doctor Bendes Ketteract who was so engrossed with the readings he was studying, he didn't notice the blue-clad Andorian step up to him.

"Doctor," she said respectfully. For somebody paying attention it would not have been difficult to read the science officer's tone, subtly asking for the civilian to vacate her seat.

The molecular physicist was not paying any attention at all.

Kuznetsov however noticed and with an annoyed grunt began to make his way over to the science console, undoubtedly already thinking of a few choice words for the troublesome scientist.

But the Andorian raised a hand in his direction, telling him to stay put and let her deal with this. Reluctantly the first officer stopped.

She placed one hand on the back of the chair and then leaned forward until her head was just inches from his. "What have you found?"

"It's amazing, it truly is. There is no doubt that we are heading into the right direction, I'm picking up more data by the minute. But most of it doesn't make much sense to our sensors. Whatever powers we are looking at here, we haven't even invented a scale to measure them yet. The implications are simply stunning."

Talana nodded along but she doubted that he had noticed, in fact he may not even have realized who had posed the question, considering how much he was focused on the screens. She of course couldn't deny her own scientific curiosity. She understood perfectly well that this wasn't mere hyperbole, whatever they had stumbled upon here was extremely significant, perhaps even the most significant discovery she had ever been party to.

“Would you mind letting me have a look?” she said, allowing just a tiny hint of steel in her voice.

He ignored her completely. “I have to see this—whatever this is—up close. God, this is so much more than I ever could have expected.”

She rolled her eyes. He was beginning to push it.

“Doctor,” she said, this time forcefully enough to tear him from his reverie and turn to see her for the first time. “When I was a child,” she said much more softly now, “I had to share all my toys with my brothers and sisters.”

He looked at her entirely dumbfounded, the relevance of this apparent non sequitur not registering with him at all. “Beg your pardon?”

She flashed him a smile. “I am not a child anymore, Doctor, and I don’t share my toys.”

It took another few seconds for the other shoe to drop. “Right,” he said. “Well, I’m almost finished, besides I’m not certain that you would fully appreciate what I have discovered here.”

The insult appeared to have been unintended and more a result of his professional arrogance instead of outright malice or spite and she didn’t let it bother her. “I think I will be the judge of that, Doctor. Now, with all due respect, get out of my chair.”

This time there had been enough unveiled menace in her tone to remind Ketteract that for all her beauty and elegance, this woman came from a race reputed to produce the greatest warriors in the Federation. And judging by the contrite expression on his face, he probably didn’t want to find out just how well deserved that reputation really was.

“Of course,” he said and stood but stopped short from offering an actual apology. Instead he remained glued to the spot to be able to look over the Andorian’s shoulders after she had reclaimed her station.

The first officer couldn’t help but utter an amused laugh which it turned out didn’t sound much different to his earlier grunt.

“Sir, we are approaching the Iota Crucis system,” said Lawford from navigation.

Bob Wesley leaned forward a little further almost as if he could already see their destination in the distance. “Aliz, slow to impulse power.”

The Hungarian-born helmswoman acknowledged. “Slowing to impulse, aye sir,” she said and found the bright red button which would shut down their faster-than-light engines.

Wesley swiveled towards Talana. "Commander, what do we know about Iota Crucis?"

The science officer had that information already up on the screen. "Eight planets and twelve dwarf planets orbiting a class-three orange giant. Only one planet, Iota Crucis IV, can support life. But barely, it's borderline class-L. However of its six moons at least three have habitable biospheres. Last Federation survey dated 2263 had this system uninhabited except for indigenous flora and fauna on Iota Crucis IV and its moons."

The last statement caught the first officer's interest. "Uninhabited? So are we looking for a natural phenomenon?"

Ketteract was quick to shake his head. "I severely doubt that what we have experienced was natural in origin."

"Uh, Commodore, I hate to contradict Commander Zha'Thara's report but I'm definitely picking up signs of intelligent life within the system, judging by the radio signals I'm picking up," said Cilla Oudekirk from communications, holding her silver ear piece in an attempt to identify what she was hearing.

"Could be Romulans," warned Kuznetsov and glanced at the captain who, judging by his serious expression, agreed with him. He gave him a nod.

The Russian knew what to do. "Oudekirk, sound red alert and general quarters. All hands to battle stations. Lawrence, shields to full power. Have phaser control ready and on stand-by."

And immediately the bridge erupted into a well-practiced flurry of activity. Various officers jumping from their chairs and relaying orders to other parts of the ship, while the slightly accented voice of Cilla Oudekirk was channeled through every speaker on *Lexington*, prompting the crew to man their stations, batten down the hatches and prepare for battle.

Within a few seconds the bridge settled down again, the crew now in position and anxiously awaiting a potential confrontation with an enemy. The red alert klaxons quietly flashed like an excited heartbeat as silence reigned on the bridge once more.

It was Lawrence who broke it first. "Reading starship activity close to the fourth planet, sir."

The Bear moved to the Englishman's left. His sensor hood had popped up from his console and he was peering into it. "Give me a reading, Mister. Romulans?"

"I'm ... not certain," he said with equal part frustration and annoyance, knowing full well that his arduous first officer wouldn't be satisfied with such a report. "But there are a lot of them. If I'm reading this right, well over a hundred ships."

Oudekirk actually gasped at that revelation. Her first thought, no doubt, that they had wandered right into a Romulan trap.

"Could this be an invasion?" said Bathory, unable to keep the fear out of her own voice and then turned to look at the commodore behind her.

His unfazed demeanor gave her and the rest of the crew comfort. But clearly he needed answers himself as he once more turned his captain's seat to look towards his science officer. "Commander, what do you make of those ships?"

Talana was enough of a veteran to not appear flustered by potentially finding herself facing a Romulan armada. Instead she meticulously studied her sensor readings. "If those are Romulan ships, they are of a design we've never encountered before. And they're small. Very small. Maybe five meters long each."

"Some sort of missiles then?" the first officer said.

The Andorian shook her head. "I'm reading unknown life signs. Unless they are on a suicide mission I don't think we're looking at projectiles here."

"Put them on screen," Wesley said and turned back to face the viewer. "Maximum magnification."

At first it looked like a cloud of densely packed space debris, swirling in an entirely random pattern. But after his eyes had adjusted, it became more and more obvious that there was clear logic to the movements of the flat, small crafts. And soon enough their dance around each other became almost hypnotic.

"Reminds me of a swarm of bees," said Bathory.

It wasn't a bad analogy as the tiny ships actually looked black and bright yellow under the bright sunlight from the Iota Crucis star.

And they all suddenly stopped in their tracks. It startled *Lexington's* bridge crew so much that it took them a second to register that they had in fact turned towards them and set out on an intercept course, quickly beginning to swarm again but without changing their general direction.

"They've seen us," said Lawrence.

"Da," the Russian said. "Stand by weapons."

But Wesley wasn't quite ready for the sword yet. "Lieutenant, open hailing frequencies."

"Frequencies open, sir."

"Attention unknown crafts. This is Commodore Robert Wesley of the United Federation of Planets on board the starship *Lexington*. We have come for the purpose of scientific study and exploration and we have no hostile intentions towards you. Please respond if you are able," he said then waited a moment before looking at his communications officer.

She shook her head. There was no response.

"Any chance they didn't get that?" said the first officer.

"It went out on all frequencies and they appear to have the means to pick-up subspace radio. They got the message but they're either unable or unwilling to respond," she said.

"Here they come," said Aliz Bathory.

The ship shuddered as it was struck by weapon's fire. But instead of being fired upon from a distance, the tiny crafts practically engulfed the entire ship, turning the view screen into a swirling mass of movement.

"Shields are holding," said Kuznetsov who had moved to the damage control station. "They're hitting us with low-yield mass drivers. It's not causing any significant damage to our shields."

Bathory shuddered. "Makes me feel like bugs crawling all over my skin," she said as she kept her eyes on the screen.

Wesley got out of his chair and stepped up to the railing opposite to Talana's station. "Any theories on these ships, Commander?"

"They appear to be simple, one-man crafts equipped with impulse engines and mass driver coils. No warp engines. The life signs are more difficult to identify but I doubt there is more than one person per ship."

"Where did they come from?"

She turned to look at him. "Best estimate? Iota Crucis IV."

"Same place where the energy readings originate," said Ketteract who hadn't strayed more than two steps from the science console. "These ships are trying to keep us away from it."

"Commander, you said that this system is uninhabited. If these ships don't have warp drive, how did they get here?"

"I've been asking myself the same question, sir," she said, clearly at a loss herself. "The only possible explanation I can think of is that they have been brought here by other means."

Wesley looked back at the screen as if it could provide answers. "Brought here by whom?"

Bathory shrieked as her console exploded in sparks. The commodore was next to her in an instant, pulling her away from the burning station. A crewman with a fire extinguisher arrived a few seconds later to put out the flames.

The young woman looked thankfully at Wesley.

"Shield generator two-four overloaded, causing an energy surge," said Kuznetsov from damage control.

"We're being picked to pieces here," said the commodore.

"Shoot them out of the damn sky then," said Ketteract but then quickly held his tongue when he noticed Kuznetsov's scowl meant for him.

"Even if we tried," said Lawrence, "there are far too many of them and they are too fast for our phasers. We may take a few down with a couple of lucky shots but that's the best we can hope for."

Wesley helped the helmswoman back into her chair before taking his own seat. He seemed to consider his options for a moment. "Back us off, Ensign, engines full reverse."

"What?" Ketteract, couldn't believe it. "We're retreating?"

"You said it yourself, Doctor," said Bob Wesley. "They're trying to keep us from the planet. Let's put that theory to the test."

"Engines at full reverse."

True enough after a few more minutes of constant bombardment, their ride smoothed out considerably and the swarm seemed to disengage, heading back towards the fourth planet.

"You were right," said Lawford. "They are defending Iota Crucis IV."

"Aliz, take us within maximum sensor range and then hold our position," said Wesley and then began to thoughtfully massage his chin.

After a couple more minutes Bathory confirmed their position and brought the ship to a full stop.

Ketteract didn't seem to appreciate the quietness that had once again befallen the bridge. "Now what? We can't just sit here and do nothing. Those energy readings are coming from that planet."

"But it looks as if the natives don't want us playing in their backyard," said Lawford.

"What natives?" the scientist shot back. "You heard the report. This system is supposed to be uninhabited. These ... things don't even belong

here. Let's find a way to neutralize them and get to that planet. We don't have the time to just sit here and do nothing."

But if Wesley shared the same urgency as Ketteract he did a masterful job at hiding it. Instead he turned his chair very slowly until he came face to face with the exasperated scientist. And even then he didn't speak straight away, only infuriating the man further.

Then he stood and headed for the red-painted turbolift doors. "Senior staff to the briefing room in ten minutes. Mister Lawford, you have the conn."

Agamemnon, 2372

The cup of herbal tea had gone untouched as it sat on the coffee table in front of an obviously distracted Amaya Donners, seemingly too pre-occupied with her own thoughts as she stared blankly into empty space.

“You want to tell me what’s on your mind?” Vej said.

She turned to look at the black-haired Ullian telepath as if she had only just realized that he was there.

“You know, traditionally that’s how this works,” he said as she still refused to talk. “You tell me about the things that have you worried and I offer my humble and all-too-often ignored advice. After four years of this, I would have thought you understood that process.”

Maya aimed a displeased frown at the counselor.

“Unless you would rather have me run this session telepathically,” he added.

“Don’t you dare.”

He quickly raised his hands defensively. “Just kidding.”

Amaya knew that Ullians had a strict code when it came to using their amazing telepathic skills with non-telepaths. They took it as seriously as a Klingon took his honor or a Ferengi latinum and while it may have greatly restricted his abilities to know what people were thinking at any given time, she had often found that Vej had unique insights into people’s thoughts simply by virtue of having a long and dedicated career in psychology. And of course it helped that as a telepath he had hands-on experience at probing a person’s minds even if it had only been those who had given their implicit approval.

“But you don’t need telepathic skills to know that you’re more preoccupied than usual with your own thoughts. Something specific, I’d say. Maybe something that has come up recently.”

She focused on his hazel colored eyes. “And you are sure you’re not reading my mind?”

"If I were reading your mind, you would know."

She nodded slowly. He had communicated with her in that manner previously and for no other reason as to sate her own curiosity. And it was true that an Ullian mind probe was usually invasive enough to be noticed. It wasn't as subtle as Betazoid empathy and while not exactly painful either, it made it difficult for Ullians to read somebody's mind secretly.

"So, do you want to talk about it or shall we just spend the next hour in silence? That too can be therapeutic, I've been told."

Maya uttered a small sigh. "I can't really talk about it."

"Classified?"

"Yeah."

He nodded. "I can understand that. But you realize of course that anything we discuss here stays strictly between us, right?"

Maya had no doubt of Vej's discretion both professionally and otherwise. And yet the orders surrounding the Omega Directive had been quite clear. Do not discuss Omega or the directive itself with anyone with a security clearance of level nine and below which practically meant she couldn't talk about it with any member of her crew and definitely not with a civilian.

She had spent the hours since getting the shocking orders from Admiral Glover reading through the classified information he had provided and she had started to understand why Starfleet had decided to shroud Omega in so much secrecy. The dangers of the molecule were entirely palpable and Starfleet was right to be afraid of the potential consequences of this information falling into the wrong hands. And yet, she hated the idea of suppressing information. It went against her core beliefs that any government or organization should keep knowledge away from its own people because of fear of where it may lead. It was a lesson she was now learning slowly, that sometimes reality and practicability trumped idealism. Or did they? Truth be told, she wasn't entirely convinced yet.

"I know," she said after a few moments of considerations.

"This has something to do with our new orders, doesn't it?"

She nodded.

"Okay," he said. "I don't want you to compromise on whatever orders and directives you may have been given by Starfleet Command. That they are serious, of that I have no doubt. You have ordered *Agamemnon* to change course suddenly and without much explanation and

now we're heading towards the Neutral Zone at maximum warp. That's all I know. And I suppose all anyone on board besides you knows."

She nodded again.

"But sometimes you can talk about things without really talking about things," he added with a little, almost mischievous smile.

She leaned back in her chair and considered him for a moment. "I find myself in a situation I've never been before. I suppose you could say that for the entirety of the past week though, right?" she said. "I've never been a starship captain before either. But these new orders, they are like nothing I would have expected. I understand that my job will require me to make difficult decisions and even keep secrets from my officers or my crew but this—this is different."

"How so?" he said. "Without getting into specifics."

"I don't know if I can do what I've been asked to do. And not just morally or ethically. I don't know if it can be done practically. And I really don't know if I can do it alone," she said. "Ideally what I need is to talk to someone who can understand exactly what I'm going through and what these orders mean. But I'm not allowed to."

"A peer then?"

"Yes. But Glover has ordered us to strict radio silence and I'm kind of the only starship captain around at the moment."

"You were right to say that your new role will require you to make difficult decisions and it strikes me that this would be one of them."

Maya shook her head and then leaned forward to take a sip of her tea. "That's just it. There are no decisions to be made here. They've already been made for me. I'm just to follow orders and shut up. Quite literally."

"And I never believed that," said Vej. "No matter what you've been told, you remain a starship captain. An individual who Starfleet has entrusted to make important life or death decisions at a moment's notice. And you have to be free to make those decisions and have the confidence that the people who put you here will back you up on those."

"You're implying I should disregard my orders?"

"No, not at all," he said with a quick headshake. "I'm saying that as a starship captain sometimes you will have to make decisions to the best of your abilities and entirely dependent on what you feel is going to be best for your ship, your crew, Starfleet and the Federation. And you will be the only person to be able to make them because you're the only person fully

aware of all the factors on the ground. Not some politician or admiral hundreds of light-years away."

Maya nodded in silent agreement. She hated the idea of disregarding a direct order but what if matters were made worse because she had decided to stick to the strict letter of the law? After all, the stakes were too high and perhaps sometimes it was necessary to use your own initiative for the greater good.

"You know Terrence once came to me with a similar conundrum," said Vej.

She shot him an astonished glance. "Glover?"

He nodded.

She smiled. "You're telling me that you used to counsel Terrence Glover? Captain Terrence 'I-know-it-all and never-make-a-mistake' Glover?"

Vej frowned at that. "Of course not. If I did, I certainly wouldn't be telling you about it. He was simply asking for friendly advice and I was more than happy to indulge him."

"Even that I'm having a hard time believing."

"If you'd asked him, he'd probably deny it," said Vej. "But when he came to me for my advice in a similar situation, I told him to try and get some inspiration from people who have done what he did. There is no better way to understand what it means to be a starship captain than to study those who have successfully risen to the challenge in the past. And you know what?" he said. "I think he took it to heart."

Maya thought about that for a moment. "I've always had a soft spot for Robert Wesley and his captaincy on the old *Lexington*."

"Then perhaps that's a good place for you to start your search for the answers you're looking for."

* * *

"Sir, I'd like to volunteer for extra readiness drills with Chief Holly."

Commander Texx shot the seemingly eager lieutenant a sidelong glance as they briskly walked together down the corridor on deck sixteen. "I don't think so."

"How about joining the Marines in their daily training exercises? I could use the practice to brush up on my combat skills."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you are trying to get yourself out of this assignment," he said with a smirk as they continued along the corridor.

"It's not that at all, sir," Allenby said quickly. "I just think that my skills would be put to better use somewhere else. There are plenty of technicians on board who would probably be better suited for this task."

The Bolian first officer stopped in front of the doors leading to their destination and then turned towards her. "I seriously hope that you're not implying that you consider yourself above configuring the navigational deflector."

"Of course not," she said with semi-outrage.

"Good. Because Chen and his people have their hands full finishing up the systems shakedown since we got our new orders and I need all hands on deck. The deflector has been giving us trouble since we left spacedock and seeing that we're traveling at high warp, we can't afford for it going down now."

"I understand. It's just that—"

"And as the chief operations manager on this ship, you're more than qualified for this task while the person responsible for piloting *Agamemnon* will be able to assist you to ensure the navigational components are properly calibrated."

"About that. I don't think I need any input from the pilot on this. As you said, I'm perfectly qualified. It may be a waste of resources to involve—"

"I'm not late, am I?" Bobby DeSoto called out as he jogged down the corridor to meet up with Texx and Allenby.

The lieutenant quickly shot the man an annoyed frown but kept her thoughts to herself.

"Just in time," said Texx and then stepped into deflector control just beyond those doors they had assembled in front.

"Hi there," Bobby said to Allenby with a wide grin.

She glared at him a moment longer before following the first officer.

"What?" he said and then followed suit also.

"Alright people," said Texx once they were inside and faced the bulky equipment and the many workstations which made up the main deflector control room. "As you're both aware the navigational deflector

needs to be re-aligned. Now, I appreciate that this isn't an easy task while we're travelling at warp nine but the captain has made it clear that we cannot afford to slow down to do this. So I need you both to work together and do this as quickly and efficiently as you can," said the first officer, looking back and forth between the two officers. "I don't have to tell you that this is sensitive stuff and even more so while it is running under full power, so be careful and get this done right. Any questions?"

Bobby shook his head. "Not a one. Let's get started."

But Allenby looked almost pleadingly at the first officer. "Sir, I appreciate that this is an important task but can't we reconsider who is going to—"

"Lieutenant," he said sternly. "You're a Starfleet officer, are you not? You're here to follow orders not question them. Now carry on. I expect you to have this done within three hours," he said and turned towards the exit.

But Allenby was not yet ready to give up and quickly intercepted him before Texx had a chance to leave her alone with the young helmsman. "Sir, please. If this is some sort of punishment for going to the captain about DeSoto, there are plenty of much worse alternatives you could consider," she said, mindfully keeping her voice low enough to keep the ensign from overhearing the conversation.

"If this were your punishment, Lieutenant, what would make you think that you had a choice in the way it would be administered?"

She responded with a blank look.

"Contrary to what you may believe, Tess, I'm not trying to punish you. I need this reconfiguration done yesterday and you two happened to be available. And both Cap and I need to see that you two can work together. Now, stop complaining and get a move on," he said and this time promptly left the room.

"Hey Tess, where should we get started?" Bobby said as he was looking over the computer console. "I think the problem may be with the EPS induction coil from the secondary graviton polarity source generator."

Allenby turned slowly to face him and aim a less than pleased look into his direction which to her disdain he failed to notice. Having apparently given up on any chance to avoid working with DeSoto, she slowly approached. "Let's get one thing clear right off the bat, *Ensign*," she said, her voice firm as steel. "You will address me as *Lieutenant*. Is that clear?"

He looked up to spot the serious expression on her face. "Sir, yes, sir," he responded with mock discipline. "Lieutenant, sir."

She ignored the jibe and almost pushed him aside as she reviewed the same computer station he had been studying. "We'll have to take the secondary graviton generator offline and then replace the induction coil. There are enough redundant generators to ensure continued operation of the deflector while we do the replacement."

"Still tricky stuff," said DeSoto. "I don't know about you but I'd rather not get fried by 800,000 megawatt of raw current."

"Just focus on the task and do as I say and we'll be just fine," she said without gracing him with another look. Instead she went to work on the station. After a moment they both felt the subtle rumble of the deck plating underneath their boots as one generator powered down and two others came to life to pick up the slack. "Follow me," she said as she headed for the hatch leading to the induction coil assembly and the deflector dish hardware.

It was a short trip down a narrow ladder until they reached the parabolically shaped backside of the powerful navigational deflector whose main job it was to keep the ship safe from macroscopic and submicron particles while it traveled through space at faster than light speeds.

Various conduits connected the deflector to its powerful generators as well as to the long-range sensor array.

Allenby quickly identified the induction coil leading to the generator she had shut down to affect repairs. "I want you to monitor any residual EPS power flow while I start dismantling the coil itself."

"Yes, Lieutenant, sir," he said.

There wasn't much room in the cramped space however and in order to get to the monitoring station he had no choice but to push himself past her.

"Watch it," she said as he bumped into her.

"Apologies, Lieutenant, sir," he said. "But this is the only way," he added and continued pushing himself past her, only to leave her even more irritated by the unwanted contact.

He simply shrugged it off and then attended the console.

Allenby shot him another glare before she turned towards the coil.

"EPS power flow to secondary conduit shows at zero. But you might want to give it a few minutes to cool down before you—"

“Son of a bitch,” she cried out and quickly pulled back from the super-heated conduit.

“—try and touch it,” he continued with a smirk as he watched her shake out her hand.

“Wipe that grin of your face, Ensign.”

He places his hand over his nose and mouth and dramatically wiped it across his lips, replacing the smile with a more serious expression. “As you command, sir.”

“This is your fault for distracting me.”

Bobby gave her a confused look. “My fault? What did I do?”

“What did you do?” she said with a disbelieving tone in her own voice. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Where do I start? You’re a hopelessly immature child. You take nothing seriously. You show no respect for the uniform or your fellow officers. You have absolutely no discipline or appreciation for the chain of command or Starfleet in general. And to make things even worse, you’ve had everything you don’t deserve handed to you on a silver platter.”

He simply stared at her for a moment, clearly not having expected this kind of outburst.

She paid no attention and turned back towards the coil, now that it had cooled she quickly began to dismantle the induction assembly. But she was far from done putting DeSoto in his place. “When I was in your shoes and I had just graduated the Academy I was thankful for the assignment I was given which I had earned due to hard work and dedication. Not like you. For you everything is just a game, isn’t it? A fun adventure, an opportunity to play silly pranks. Well, let me tell you something. Life isn’t all fun and games.”

“I think Wayne was right,” he said as he monitored his station.

“Wayne was right about what?”

“That you’re so mad with me because you secretly like me.”

“Like you?” she said with disbelief. “Have I not made myself clear, Ensign? I think you’re a disgrace to the uniform.”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “And yet you have a total crush on me. Just so you know, I’m totally fine with that.”

She whipped around to face him, her jaw hanging open.

DeSoto looked up and that smirk was back. “Women have always been into me, I’ve gotten used to the DeSoto effect over the years. And if I

may be so forward, Lieutenant, you're quite attractive yourself so maybe it's not a bad fit after all."

"You ... you may certainly be not, Ensign," she stammered. "In fact you're way out of line."

But DeSoto had noticed something on his control panel. "Uh, Lieutenant, we may have a problem here with—"

She shook her head with continued disbelief. "The audacity to suggest that I have any kind of interest in you quite frankly is beyond arrogance. I've half a mind to have you put on official report for your continuously inappropriate behavior towards—"

"Lieutenant, I really think you should step away from that conduit right now," he said urgently.

"And stop interrupting me when I'm addressing you, Ensign. I'm going to suggest to Commander Texx—"

"EPS surge, get down!"

And then it finally registered with her that she was in serious danger. Her eyes grew wide as she saw the flash of an impending power surge. She jumped back but not quite in time to avoid being hit by the powerful discharge cursing through the conduit which promptly erupted with sparks and smoke.

Allenby was pushed backwards by the force of the explosion and crashed against a nearby bulkhead which she hit with a groan before she slid down to the floor.

"Tess," DeSoto cried out and rushed to her side.

He found her conscious but clearly in pain, holding her left hand which had been badly burned. "Are you alright?"

She looked at him as he squatted down next to her. "Do I look alright?" she said through gritted teeth.

"Can you walk? Let me help you to sickbay," he said and tried to pull her onto her feet.

But she quickly freed herself from his attempts. "Just stay away from me, okay? Just stay the hell away," she said and then struggled to stand by herself.

Bobbie watched her as she awkwardly climbed up the ladder, only being able to use one hand and then disappeared onto the deck above.

Agamemnon, 2372

“Red Alert, all hands report to battle stations. The ship is now at Red Alert, all hands report to battle stations. This is a drill.”

The crew of the *Agamemnon* hurried back and forth through the corridors, urgently trying to get to where they needed to be. Weapons control, sickbay rallying point, damage control stations, main engineering, the bridge, the armory or in the case of civilians, to their quarters to be out of the way of those Starfleet officers and crewmen whose job it was to keep the ship and her crew as safe as possible.

Only two individuals appeared to be ignoring the organized chaos which took place all around them to the steady beat of the monotonous red alert klaxon.

Texx was looking over a padd with one eye while skillfully managing to dodge crewmembers running past him. “We’ve scheduled six more drills which should bring our total to nine before we reach our destination, with every shift having gone through at least two exercises. Readiness times have been improving steadily and I have to say I’m mightily impressed by Chief Holly. The crew really seems to respond well to his drills.”

Maya walked at her first officer’s side, equally making her best effort to stay out of people’s way. She nodded. “I’ve given him free rein to make sure the crew is as prepared as possible for whatever we may face.”

“He’s doing a fine job,” Texx said. “I haven’t seen this kind of dedication and hustle since the height of the Cardassian border wars. And the officers and crew are working together more efficiently than I can ever remember seeing on a starship.”

The captain smiled at that. “It’s very important to me that those two get along and work hand-in-hand. On too many ships officers and ratings are kept so far apart, one could get the impression they’re separate entities all together. I wanted to make sure from the onset that on *Agamemnon* there

is only one crew, working together to achieve one goal," she said just before she flattened herself against the bulkhead to allow a team of Marines to jog past her.

"That makes a lot of sense," the Bolian said. "I remember how much my older brother, a senior NCO in Starfleet for a good twenty years, kept moaning about officers' inherent sense of entitlement," he added as he waited for the captain to catch up with him again.

"How big is that family of yours?" she said when she was back at his side.

He had a twinkle in his eye. "Oh, we're just a regular-size Bolian family," he said. "At last count I had thirty-three siblings."

Maya uttered a surprised cough before she focused on the matter at hand again. "Make sure every crewmember gets a chance to catch their breath and decent rack time before we arrive at Iota Crucis. I don't want anyone exhausted once we get there."

Texx made the appropriate notations on his padd.

Once they reached a more spacious corridor segment, Maya indicated for him to follow her into a far corner and away from the harried bustle of the crew. "How is everyone taking the new orders, Ard?"

He considered her for a moment. "Well, nobody seems to know what our new orders are exactly."

"Yes," she said and then focused in on his blue eyes. "And I'm fully aware that this isn't easy on people, especially on their very first mission right out of the gate. If it were up to me, I would brief the crew in full about what we have been asked to do. I don't appreciate keeping secrets from my own people."

"They're professionals, Cap," he said. "They understand that from time to time their captain will have to play it close to her vest. But they know to follow orders and to give their level best to ensure that whatever the mission may be, the outcome is a resounding success."

Maya touched his lower arm. "I appreciate this, I really do. This is not how I had imagined my first mission to go but knowing that my officers and crew are behind me is a comforting thought."

"As long as I'm your first officer you will never have to worry about that one," he said with an earnest expression on his face. "I make you that promise now."

She gave him a grateful nod.

"If however you would like to drop me a hint or two, off the record, about what all this has to do with the sudden appearance of a Greek letter on the bridge, I would make a killing on the ongoing pool," he said with lopsided grin.

Maya shot him a mock frown.

"I thought not," he added quickly.

She uttered a little laugh. "Suppose you can't stop the rumor mill."

"On a starship? Not a chance."

Donners nodded. "We'll just have to keep the crew too busy to give the thing too much thought, won't we? Keep up those drills and keep me updated on performance stats."

"You got it, Cap."

"And set up a senior officer's dinner for tomorrow night," she said. "I won't be able to answer questions but it might help to put them at ease a little bit."

He made another note. "Done and done."

"Good. I'll catch up with you later," she said and then headed off into the opposite direction.

* * *

Maya Donners slipped into the main science lab almost entirely unnoticed. Mostly because the team inside was hard at work and focused entirely on the task at hand.

"Where are we with that positive identification?" said Wayne Daystrom as he worked at the master control station set up at the center of the lab.

"Still having difficulties with the interference from the nebula," responded one of the crewmembers at the opposite end of the room. "Energy transfer to EM flux sensor array only increased resolution point six percent."

"That's below the required threshold to compensate for radiation distortion," said A.J. Elborough, an attractive, dark-haired ensign, as she walked from one station to the next, making seemingly minute changes to each as she went along.

"Should we bring thermal imaging online?" said a Trill petty officer, looking up from a padd. Maya couldn't remember his name.

Daystrom shook his head. "Not going to help on a class nine dichromatic nebula with this level of gravimetric distortions," he said. "Come on people, the bridge needs to know who is using it as a hiding place. We need ideas," he added without ever looking up.

"Still looks like a Cardassian *Galor*-class to me," said Elborough.

"In that soup? It would have lost structural integrity within minutes," responded the Trill.

"It could be using metaphasic shielding," the ensign said.

Daystrom looked up. "Can we get some more hard evidence before we jump to conclusions, please? How do we stand with the gamma ray telescope?"

Artoss, an Efrosian ensign, manning one of the wall stations took this one. "No joy with the current power allocation."

"Ask ops to prioritize the telescope. In the meantime we have to find another toy to get what we need," said Daystrom and attended to the master control station again. "Narrow-angle EM?"

"That could work," the Trill said quickly and then began to frantically input commands into his padd. "Can we get the ship to adjust our orientation by twelve degrees?"

Daystrom quickly put in the request to the helm station on the bridge.

"Got it," said Artoss. "Narrow-angle has a lock on our bogey."

Daystrom nodded along. "Re-route all power we've got allocated to the long range sensors package to the narrow-angle EM scanner. I want it at 110 percent."

Elborough stepped up to another station and then smiled. "We now have 113 percent on the narrow-angle."

"Analysis going through the computer now," said the Trill petty officer with clear anticipation in his voice.

All the science personnel in the room turned to look at their respective monitors, eager to learn what their efforts had yielded. The comely ensign was the first to share. "Definitely Cardassian," she said with palpable excitement. "Heavy cruiser, *Keldon*-class," she said. "Employing rotating, paratrinic shielding."

"Confirmed," said the petty officer. "Computer has it at 98 percent certainty."

Artoss shook his head. "That's pretty advanced stuff for a Cardassian ship, no wonder we didn't get a positive ID sooner."

“Attention all hands, stand down from red alert. I say again, stand down from red alert,” the voice of Senior Chief Shane Holladay echoed from the overhead speakers. *“This concludes this exercise. Response times to follow: Damage control team one: two minutes, twelve seconds. Damage control team two: two minutes, eighteen seconds. Damage control team three ...”*

The science team listened carefully until he announced their response time at two minutes and forty-eight seconds.

Ensign Elborough proudly smiled at that. “We shaved off twelve seconds from the last drill,” she said proudly.

Daystrom was clearly less excited. “We can do better next time,” he said to the room. “Just because a Cardassian ship with paratrinic shielding is unlikely, doesn’t mean we should count it out. We have to expect the unexpected every time.”

The science crew slowly nodded along in assent.

“I for one am very impressed,” Maya said and stepped away from the bulkhead from where she had observed the science team. “That was a good job, people. Good lateral thinking by everyone.”

“Captain?” Daystrom said and quickly stiffened, not having realized until now that she had been in the room.

The rest of the twelve-man team in the lab also turned towards her and stood at attention.

Maya smirked at that inwardly. This behavior was to be expected from a fresh and inexperienced crew which for the most part had only just passed the Academy or basic training a few weeks ago. “At ease, folks,” she said quickly. “Why don’t you go and catch a break after a job well done?” she said and then looked at Daystrom. “If that is alright with you of course, Lieutenant.”

The young officer seemed momentarily dumbfounded by the captain deferring to him but then quickly nodded when he realized that everyone was awaiting his decision. “Yes, of course. By all means. We’ll have a review session at ... uh ... 1400 hours.”

Most of the crewmembers presumably not on shift duty cleared out the lab.

“The rest of you,” said Maya, “would you mind giving the Lieutenant and me the room?”

It was phrased as a question only for decorum’s sake and the remaining crewmembers understood this and promptly cleared the lab.

Once they were alone Maya focused on the broad-shouldered science officer. "I wasn't just trying to be nice earlier," she said. "I really did think you did a good job and it reflects on your leadership skills that you have been able to get this kind of performance out of your department."

"Thank you, sir. And I still think that we can do even better."

"Of that I have no doubt," she said and then glanced towards the ceiling. "Computer, seal this room. Re-establish access only on my authorization code."

The computer chirped promptly in acknowledgment. "Science lab one is now sealed."

The junior lieutenant shot Donners a perplexed look. "Captain?"

"I debated for a long time with myself if I should let you in on this or not, Wayne and just to be clear, I'm probably in violation of a handful of Starfleet regulations by doing this, but I decided that the stakes are too high as not to clue in the one person on this ship who may be able to assist me with what we'll have to do."

Daystrom's expression turned even more puzzled.

"What I'm about to show you is for your eyes only and you are not to discuss this with any member of this crew, or in fact any other person period. Is that clear?"

He nodded sharply. "Absolutely, sir."

She raised a padd she had brought with her and quickly established a secure interface with the science lab computer. Within moments the main display showed a computer simulation of a bright blue microscopic molecule blown up a hundred-fold and consisting of thousands of even smaller particles all working in perfect symmetry to make up the whole.

Daystrom rose from his chair upon seeing this. "The Silentium particle? That's impossible."

It was Maya's turned to aim a perplexed look at the man. "The *what* particle?"

But the young scientist seemed too engrossed in studying the computer simulation to pay much attention to the captain.

"Lieutenant?"

"Silentium," he said without being able to tear away his gaze from the screen. "It's what I called this."

Maya considered this for a moment. "That's Latin for what? Silence?"

He nodded absent-mindedly. "Among other things. In a religious sense it can also mean perfection which in a way this is exactly what it is. Perfection. Endlessly powerful and endlessly flawless."

"Wait a minute," she said. "You're telling me you are familiar with this molecule already?"

He turned to face her for the first time since having been shown the simulation, his facial expressions once more as quizzical as before. "Of course. Isn't that the reason you're showing me this?"

"Lieutenant, I'm showing you this because our mission is to locate this molecule and because I will require your help with that task. I have been told that nobody in the Federation is aware of its existence other than Starfleet officers of captain's grade and above, as well as a few high-ranking officials. Why don't you start telling me how you've learned of it?"

"I practically discovered it," he said. "Or at least I thought I did."

"Go on," she said and took a seat when she felt a story coming on.

She was not to be disappointed. He took a deep breath before starting and it was obvious to her that this was not an easy thing for him to share. Whatever his history with the Omega molecule had been, it seemed already apparent that it had been a painful one. "I came across the theory by pure accident really. I spent most of my early days at the Academy theorizing on new power sources for starship engines like many science and engineering cadets are wont to. I suppose my edge was that I had thousands of pages of notes from my great-grandfather to study. Mostly unpublished work and much of it either entirely outside my understanding or quite possibly nonsensical ramblings of a man slowly losing his grip on reality.

Either way I did find documents speculating on the existence of a super-particle of sorts which not only could yield nearly infinite power but may also have been a possible linchpin to the creation of the universe itself. He called this silentium on the account of its religious implications.

I simply took his notes and findings to its logical conclusion and by my third year at the Academy I was ready to unveil these incredible findings as part of my thesis. I really thought I had re-invented the wheel in those days and I was close to dedicated my entire professional life to the pursuit of this new particle."

She sensed what was coming next. "I take it the Academy staff didn't take to well to your research."

His facial expressions twisted into an ugly frown, giving proof that he still harbored quite a bit of anger on the subject. "That's putting it mildly. I was completely shutdown. Nobody wanted to even look at what I had done. I was called in front of the Academy commandant who threatened me with expulsion and criminal charges if I didn't discontinue my research immediately. The following day my work had been erased from every computer station on campus. Worse, even my personal computer had been wiped clean. I tried to appeal to various civilian and Starfleet authorities but it was made clear to me in no uncertain terms that I would lose on grounds of national security.

I was outraged, Captain. This could have been my life's work; my legacy and they simply pretended it didn't even exist. It took me a long time to get over that. Ultimately my fear of ending up like my great-grandfather convinced me to stop obsessing over it and to try finding a new calling," he said and then looked back at the screen. "But I was never able to completely forget about silentium."

Donners uttered a sigh as she considered the young scientist as he was once more enthralled by the particle on the screen. She had hated the notion of Starfleet trying to suppress the existence of this molecule from the moment she had learned of this practice. Now her worst fears had come true. How many more enterprising scientists had been intimidated and forced to abandon their work because the Federation had been too afraid of its results? Considering the unique manner in which Daystrom had been able to discover it, she truly hoped that it hadn't been many. But wasn't one too many already?

"They call it the Omega molecule," she said and Daystrom immediately whipped around to face her. "Starfleet has been aware of its existence for over a century. And you were right," she said. "It is currently considered to be the most powerful force in existence."

The science officer stood, seemingly unsure how to digest this new information. "You're telling me that Starfleet knew about this all along and they just decided to destroy my own work? Why?"

She tried to make eye contact with him, not able to miss the anger that was beginning to build up there. "The simple answer, Wayne, is that they are afraid of what could happen if its power is unleashed. Omega is extremely difficult to synthesize and even harder to contain. If only one—"

"This is outrageous," he said, momentarily forgetting whom he was speaking to. "It's censorship of the most ignorant kind. One stemming

from fear and narrow-mindedness. It's not what the Federation stands for and it cannot be allowed."

"Lieutenant, I appreciate that this is not easy for you to hear and I'm truly sorry about your experiences at the Academy but we are Starfleet officers and sometimes that means that we have to follow orders for the greater good even if we do not like them."

"This," he said and pointed at the screen with the Omega molecule, "is the greater good. And Starfleet suppresses its knowledge because they're afraid of changing the status quo? Those are medieval tactics designed to stem progress. This could usher in a new era for the entire galaxy."

"I'm not going to sit here and argue Federation policy with you, Wayne. I have my own objections over the way this has been handled but for now we do not have a choice in this matter but follow our orders and locate and destroy the Omega molecule."

"Destroy it?" he said, now nearly being driven to tears. "You cannot be serious."

Maya rubbed her forehead for a moment and then looked him back in the eye. "Consider this," she said. "What if we were talking not about a molecule of immense power but say a biological research facility, designed to genetically engineer a new kind of superior species designed to replace the human race? That too is scientific research and those who dabble in it would argue that it would usher in a new era as well. Would you make the decision to leave this facility alone and let those scientists get on with their work or would you take action?"

Daystrom visibly calmed himself, but not by much. Just enough to sit back down in his chair. "Why does it always have to be the Eugenics War analogy?"

"Because it's the best example we have of certain sciences having to be monitored and controlled for the greater good," she said. "Because humanity once paid a heavy price for letting science and progress go unchecked."

"But who makes that determination, Captain?"

She stood and stepped closer to him. "Neither you nor I, Wayne, that's all I can say about that. For now, I need to know if I can rely on you to help me with this mission. We are heading towards an area of space where we have discovered the presence of the Omega molecule and my orders are to destroy it at any cost. I don't like those orders but I

understand why I must follow them. And now that I know about your unique history with this molecule, I'm convinced I'll need your help more than ever to be able to do that."

She paused and looked him over even as he refused to make eye contact with her.

"I cannot and will not order you to assist me," she said. "In fact, I can relieve you of duty for the duration of this mission citing personal reasons if you so wish. I'll even ensure that it will not negatively affect your record. But I need to know now if you will help me or if you won't."

He looked up at her very slowly and the expression in his eyes was a pained one. Maya sympathized. Here was a man with an almost impossibly large legacy to follow up on. He'd been given a chance to distinguish himself from his famous forbearer but had been shut down for no fault of his own and now he had been asked to help destroy what he had once hoped would become his own legacy.

"I am my own man with my own path," he finally said.

Maya's expression turned quizzical.

He managed a small and humorless smile. "That's what you told me, isn't it? And you were right. My path is to be the chief science officer of the starship *Agamemnon*. Consequently I will do whatever is within my power to help you achieve our mission."

Agamemnon, 2372

“How bad is it, Doc?”

Despite her vocal objections, Bobby DeSoto hadn't ventured more than five feet from Tess Allenby's side since he had followed her into sickbay after the accident at the main deflector.

“The lieutenant has non life-threatening second-degree plasma burns to her left hand and lower forearm which extend to her dermis layer,” said Rass as she stood glancing at a padd and looking up from time to time to watch her nurse, Xolani Nyembe, efficiently treat the wound with a dermal regenerator while Allenby sat on a biobed and tried hard not wince at the discomfort.

“Human skin is such a delicate organ and very susceptible to damage, you must be more careful around sources of extreme temperatures,” she continued.

Nyembe almost stumbled over DeSoto as he tried to reach for another instrument. “Alright Ensign,” the South African said sharply. “For the last time, either stand to one side or leave sickbay at once.”

“He has no business being here,” Allenby quickly chimed in. “This is all his fault anyway.”

The ensign took a step back and placed a hand innocently on his chest. “My fault? I was trying to tell you about the energy surge but you were too distracted laying into me,” he said and then looked at the doctor. “She's going to be alright, isn't she?”

The Selay awkwardly nodded her cobra-like head. It was clearly not a natural movement as she tried to mimic the common gesture. “The lieutenant will fully recover and no scar tissue should remain after the procedure. There remains a 2% chance for the skin to develop cellulitis but this too is easily treatable.”

DeSoto looked back at the still furious Allenby. "See, you'll be good as new."

The woman rolled her eyes. "That's not the point. None of this would have happened if you hadn't been there," she barked.

The outburst momentarily stunned sickbay into silence.

Allenby blushed slightly and returned Nyembe puzzled expression as he had paused treating her wound. "He is very distracting," she said quietly.

The nurse nodded understandingly and then continued.

Commander Chen had stood nearby and watched the spectacle unfold with his arms crossed in front of his narrow, insectoid torso. His two feelers stood up straight in the air, showing that he had been paying close attention to the conversation around him. "What exactly happened?" he said in his distinct clicking-sound voice.

Both Allenby and DeSoto immediately started speaking over each other, trying to shift the blame for the accident.

The Xindi cut them off by raising both his skinny arms. "Not helpful."

Sessar-Rass looked back and forth between the lieutenant and the ensign and then at the chief engineer. "Are humans always this confusing?"

Chen shot her a seemingly sympathetic look. "Only most of the time."

"Hey, don't lump us all into the same pot," said Nyembe just as he finished with Allenby.

Chen lowered his head slightly. "Apologies, no offense intended."

The dark-skinned man offered a wide smile before he glanced back at the operations manager. "There. As promised, all better now."

She fisted her hand a few times for practice and then gave the nurse an appreciative nod.

"Now, can we try again? I need to make a full report about this incident to the first officer," Chen said.

Allenby quickly jumped off the bed and stepped closer to the chief engineer. "When you do, make sure you remind him of what I have previously reported, on the record, that Ensign DeSoto is a danger to himself and those around him. I think this incident more than proves my point. Furthermore—"

"Now wait a minute," the helmsman started to protest.

Allenby raised her pointer finger in his direction and shot him a frosty look over his shoulder. "Ensign, the grown-ups are talking."

Sessar looked on in bewilderment and even Chen didn't appear to understand exactly what was happening here.

The lieutenant faced the chief engineer again. "The captain is already aware of my concerns regarding DeSoto's behavior and I think she should be informed of this incident as well."

Chen considered her for a moment, looked at the young helmsman who appeared less than worried by Allenby's open accusations and then back at her. "You will both provide me with a report regarding this matter so that I can review it and forward it to Commander Texx."

Allenby nodded eagerly. "You have it within the hour, sir," she said and stormed off.

Bobby shot Chen a wide smirk. "Is she completely smitten with me or what?"

The Xindi engineer didn't seem to understand, judging by the movements of his lower mandibles. He exchanged another look with the CMO before he decided that he had done everything he could here. "We shall have another session on humanoid social behaviorism at 1600 hours if this suits you."

She looked positively eager. "That would suit me perfectly fine," she said quickly.

Chen turned and left sickbay.

After a moment the Selay crossed over to DeSoto. "What does 'smitten-with' mean exactly?"

His grin widened. "It means she's into me, Doc. Couldn't you tell?"

The stone-faced expression on her reptile face gave proof that she probably couldn't.

"Come on, you can't tell me you don't understand that," he said with a boyish grin. "Not after those looks you exchanged with our chief engineer."

She tilted her head slightly, indicating further puzzlement. "Commander Chen and I share a productive and professional relationship. He is assisting me in acclimating to the diverse social climate of a Starfleet vessel."

"Right," he said. "Listen, Doc, I may not be an expert on exo-sociology but I can interpret a look between two folks as well as the next guy," he said, still with that grin plastered on his face and then leisurely

strolled out of the room, leaving behind an even more befuddled Ssesar-Rass.

* * *

Amaya Donners found that *Agamemnon's* bridge design was both efficient and practical. Her chair stood almost at the dead center, giving her a great view on the workstations all around her and on the large holographic view screen mounted into the front bulkhead.

She was flanked by a chair for the first officer to her right and a mission specialist to her left, usually occupied by Arden Texx and Vej respectively.

A forward facing and dedicated science station stood at the far right and a nearly identical console, this one for engineering, was positioned at the opposite side of the bridge.

At the front and a few steps below her chair was the combined, t-shaped helm and operations console which slightly invoked the venerable design of a previous century.

To her right and slightly behind her was the tactical console usually manned by the imposing figure of Lieutenant Mer'iab and an auxiliary tactical and science station stood to her left.

Most of the back bulkhead was made up of a large master control station which was currently configured to show a cutaway diagram of the *Agamemnon* and her eighteen decks. The port and starboard bulkheads were lined with various stations for science, environmental controls and mission ops. Some of these stations were only manned depending on the ship's current mission priority.

Crimson-colored doors in the front led to her ready room and a turbolift and in the back to the observation lounge and to another lift. The entire bridge was covered in a pleasing, light-blue carpet and was lit by comfortable and glare-free white light.

"Sir, sensors are detecting severe gravimetric distortions ahead," said Wayne Daystrom from the science station at Maya's right. "It will severely affect our ability to maintain high warp."

She nodded, having expected this. "Bobby, reduce our speed to warp three point two."

"Three point two," he said and entered the appropriate commands.

Maya could barely even feel the vibrations of the deceleration through the deck plates. She recalled her previous starship assignment on the *Columbia* where the deck had had a tendency to rattle noticeably when accelerating or slowing down by just one warp factor.

"Smooth, isn't she?" Texx said with a smirk, reading his new captain perfectly.

"Remind me to congratulate Chen on a well configured warp drive," she said with a nod.

"You may be interested to know that we are now within visual range of GRS 2127-341," said Daystrom. "The largest black hole entity in the quadrant."

"Let's have a peek," said the captain.

The screen quickly shifted to show a perfectly spherical pitch black mass which was perhaps most extraordinary by its absence of everything. Gasses and spatial matter swirled around it in a circular pattern making the entire thing look like a huge, galactic drain.

The bridge crew considered it with quiet fascination.

"Ever wonder where all this stuff goes once it is swallowed up?" said DeSoto.

"In simple terms, matter undergoes spaghettification, is reformed and becomes part of the black hole itself," said the science officer.

DeSoto swiveled his chair around to look at the science officer. "Spaghettification? You just made that up."

"Jesus, Ensign, did you not pay any attention at the Academy at all? That's astrophysics 101," said Tess Allenby with a clearly annoyed tone in her voice. "How exactly did you ever make it to the helm of a starship?"

DeSoto shrugged. "I was told, whatever you do, don't fly the thing into a black hole."

The operations officer shot him another dark look but DeSoto had become quite adapt at ignoring those.

Texx wasn't quite able to wipe that grin of his face. "Alright, folks, let's focus on getting us through this sector in one piece, alright."

The two officers at the forward station quickly turned their full attention back onto their respective stations.

Vej however was still observing the fascinating sight of the black hole on the screen. "So is this thing the source of all the gravimetric disturbance in this sector?" he asked nobody in particular.

"That's the theory," said the Bolian first officer. "And good thing to. We're not far off the Romulan Neutral Zone and thanks to the black hole we have our own all-natural, anti-invasion defense system right in our backyard."

The captain exchanged a quick look with Daystrom. They both knew better why a Romulan invasion through the Gamma Hydra sector would be unlikely. It was indeed because of the severe distortions in subspace which made high warp impossible but those had nothing to do with the black hole.

VeJ noticed the look but a glance at Donners made it clear that she was not willing to elaborate on her thoughts.

"Captain, we are being hailed," said Mer'iab from the tactical station.

Maya swiveled her chair to face him, not having expected this after Admiral Glover had made it clear that *Agamemnon* would be operating under radio silence for the duration of this mission. And yet she felt a sudden surge of hope that perhaps somebody had made a mistake. Perhaps the entire Omega molecule thing had been a false alarm. And if it wasn't, Maya was not ashamed to admit that she would have been relieved if Glover was calling to let her know that he had found somebody else to deal with this mess. "Starfleet?" she said.

Lure Mer'iab shook his head. "No, sir. It is originating from a small vessel at the edge of the Iota Crucis system. I am unable to identify the signature."

Donners nodded, trying hard to mask her disappointment. "Put it on screen."

"It's audio only," the avian said.

"... *Starfleet vessel, do you read me?*" The seemingly feminine voice coming over the speakers was heavily distorted, no doubt due to the damaged subspace that lay between the two ships.

Texx and Donners shared a quick, surprised look, before Donners leaned forward in her chair. "This is Amaya Donners of the Federation starship *Agamemnon*. We are receiving your signal. Please identify yourself and advise how we can be of assistance."

"*I knew it. I knew you would come. Thank the All-Mother,*" the woman said over the comm. Donners thought she could hear a distinct clicking noise in her speech not unlike the way Chen sounded.

But the response had answered little to nothing. "Whom am I addressing?" she said.

There was a momentary pause. *"I apologize. It is just that I am very excited to finally be able to make contact with your Federation. It is something I have been waiting for a very long time. After the latest incident I was sure you would come and I have been waiting out here for many lirkiks, eagerly awaiting your arrival,"* she said, her words practically flying across the bridge. *"My name is Ket. Queen Ket if you wish to be formal. And it is of extreme urgency that I meet with you as soon as possible. I worry that we are all in a great deal of danger."*

Lexington, 2267

The three-way monitor mounted at the center of the hexagon-shaped briefing room table showed images of a relatively barren, brown and rust-red planet. The rocky surface was laced with wide canyons which seemed to dissect the large continents endlessly. Signs of crawling and buzzing animal life and intermittent appearances of green and brownish fauna gave proof that it was an inhabitable world but the little water, rough winds and jagged mountain ranges didn't make it appear particularly inviting.

"This is the surface of Iota Crucis IV as it was surveyed by the *Exeter* four years ago. Classed as a barely class-L planet, the survey team found the surface too inhospitable to be considered for a permanent outpost. The only signs of useable minerals were too far below the surface to be excavated without causing irreparable damage to the planet's ecosystem," said Zha'Thara as she provided running commentary to the slide show. Then she removed the bright yellow microtape from its slot and replaced it with a red one.

On the screens the surface images disappeared and instead showed still photographs of the sepia planet from a distance.

"These are images we took a few minutes ago with our long-distance sensors."

She cycled through them until she reached the ones that resembled orbital photographs. Unlike the pervious images, these shots were not of the surface but it wasn't difficult to make out clear signs of habitation on the planet. And not just a single outpost or sporadic settlements, there were undeniable signs of a sprawl of cities and infrastructure.

"I might be just an old-time Massachusetts quack but could somebody explain to me how anyone could build all that in just four years?" said Doctor Charles Vincent with his noticeable New England twang.

He wasn't the only one looking at the images with bewilderment. The rest of the senior officers assembled in the briefing room seemed at a loss themselves. Ketteract was perhaps the only person present who seemed the least bit excited about this unusual find and instead kept drumming his fingers on the table top.

"The short answer, Doctor," said the Andorian science officer, "is that they couldn't. At least not with the kind of technology that we are familiar with."

"That should rule out the Romulans. And the Klingons," said Commander Kuznetsov. "G'arv, any thoughts?"

The Tellarite chief engineer tugged on his bright red tunic but before he responded, he shot another look at the images on the monitor.

Vincent smirked. "I didn't think I see the day that G'arv is rendered speechless."

This caused a number of smiles among the senior staff. The vocal chief engineer was usually a man quick to share his opinion, no matter if people cared for it or not. But this mystery had clearly robbed him of one.

"I'm still holding out for the day any of your patients survive their treatments without serious brain damage," he said to the doctor.

Vincent was well accustomed to this kind of repartee, secretly enjoyed it even. "Judging by the clueless expression on your face, I'd say they usually do better than you are at the moment."

The Tellarite was not going to let that stand but before he could shoot back the appropriate insult, Robert Wesley stepped in, knowing full well that if unchecked, this banter could drag on endlessly. The crew certainly didn't mind the entertainment but he needed his people to focus. "G'arv, may I re-direct your attention to the issue at hand."

The chief engineer aimed a last glower at the doctor, making it clear that he had not conceded this round, before focusing on the monitor again. "I've heard of plans for replication technology which possibly could construct material on an industrial scale but that stuff is mostly still theoretical at his point. And even then I doubt it could do anything to that extent."

"So, are we talking about an advanced civilization here with technology far beyond what we have encountered before?" said the commodore.

Zha'Thara shook her head. "I don't think so, sir. Judging from the admittedly limited visual information we have seen so far, besides the fact

that it has appeared out of nowhere, this doesn't appear to be anything out of the ordinary. More tellingly the vessels we have already encountered were not comprised of any significantly advanced technology."

"Thank God," said the Bear. "I was getting rather bored of advanced and omnipotent beings."

"I'm sorry if I'm interrupting here," said Ketteract whose increasing impatience had finally reached the tipping point. "No, you know what, I'm not sorry at all, actually. We are losing sight of what's important. It doesn't matter who these people are or where they came from. The Ketteract readings are clearly coming from that world."

The Andorian shot him a perplexed look. "Ketteract readings?" she said with a raised white eyebrow.

He shrugged. "We don't have a name for it yet. It makes sense for it to be named after the person who first discovered it."

Vincent aimed a curious look at the first officer, the expression on his face seemingly asking: *Is this guy for real?*

Don't even get me started, was the Russian's non-verbal reply.

"To explore strange new worlds? To seek out new life and new civilizations?" said Vincent. "You may have heard those phrases before, Doctor. They are part of our charter."

But the scientists dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "Our mission out here is to find the source of these energy readings. I'm not denying that we may come across some other, far less noteworthy discoveries on our way. But we shouldn't allow ourselves to get distracted by the pretty lights which ultimately are of little scientific significance."

With a heavy sigh Vincent capitulated, clearly deciding that it wasn't worth arguing with this man and certainly nowhere near as much fun as it was with G'arv.

"Commodore, I took the liberty to speak with your chief engineer earlier, and I think we may have found a way to get passed those pesky little ships which are keeping us from Iota Crucis IV," he continued and looked towards the Tellarite.

G'arv nodded. "And what a delightful conversation we had."

Ketteract beamed proudly, missing the sarcasm completely.

"The mass drivers used on those ships aren't really the problem. Our shields can withstand them quite easily. The issue is quantity, not quality. However we may be able to compensate by bombarding our shield grid with a low intensity tachyon beam from the deflector dish. It would

reinforce the shields sufficiently to repel a multi-pronged mass driver attack. At least for a while.”

“Are we seriously considering this?” said Vincent. “It seems to me that whoever these people are, they have made their intentions quite clear. They do not want us sniffing around in their backyard. Starfleet prides itself in not interfering with other races who just want to be left alone. I’m pretty sure this one qualifies.”

“Valid point, Doctor. If nothing else we know that they’re trying to keep us away from their planet,” said Wesley and he focused on Ketteract who was most likely to have a different view on the matter. “This may be one of those cases where we should leave things well enough alone and respect these people’s wishes.”

“You cannot be serious,” he said. His face was twitching as if he was trying, unsuccessfully, to keep his emotions in check. “Commodore, the Ketteract signature—”

“For the record, I object to that term,” said the Andorian.

“Whatever we end up calling it,” he snapped at her before looking at the ship’s commander again. “It’s ... it’s like nothing we’ve ever seen before. It’s difficult for me to put this into terms you would understand but we may very well be looking at a revolution in molecular physics here. Strike that. A revolution in scientific theory, period.”

“I’m going to pretend that you are not trying to insult my intelligence on purpose, Doctor,” said Wesley, keeping his own tone sharp enough to communicate his displeasure, before he turned to look at the Andorian. “Commander, you’re not a layman. Your thoughts?”

She needed to take a little breath of air first and then looked towards Ketteract who appeared almost contrite now that he realized that the greatest discovery of his life could depend on the words spoken by some Starfleet science officer.

Zha’Thara turned back to Wesley. “To be perfectly honest, sir, I don’t even fully understand what Doctor Ketteract has found here. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t agree with him in principle that this is an extremely significant discovery. Maybe even on the scale of the Higgs boson discovery of the 21st century.”

“My high school science is a little rusty, Commander,” said Kuznetsov.

“Forget the Higgs boson,” said Ketteract, quickly reinserting himself into the conversation. “This is Einstein splitting the atom, big.”

The Andorian rolled her eyes, somewhat weary of the man's hyperbole, she didn't bother to point out that on Earth it had been scientists like Ernest Rutherford, Niels Bohr and Marrie and Pierre Curie who deserved the real credit for nuclear fission. The point had been made.

Wesley looked concerned. "Splitting the atom led us down a path of conflicts fought with weapons of mass destruction. World War Three nearly wiped out the human race."

"Exactly," Ketteract said, quickly picking up on the thread. "Now imagine a force, I don't know, a hundred times, maybe a thousand times more powerful than those primitive nuclear weapons. Imagine what it could do to a planet. No, no, imagine what it could do to an entire space sector, maybe even beyond."

"You're saying that this radiation could be weaponized on such a scale?" said Kuznetsov.

He nodded quickly. "Absolutely. In fact, I have no doubt in my mind that it could."

But Bob Wesley looked to Zh'Thara for answers instead.

"From what I've seen so far I can't see how you could weaponize this radiation—"

"That's because you suffer from a limited imagination," Ketteract said.

She aimed him a dark scowl which contrasted sharply with her beautiful features. "I wasn't finished, Doctor," she said and then turned to look at the commodore again. "What I was going to say was that I can't see how it could be weaponized with our current means but I agree that the potential is there and given enough time, research and determination it could be turned into quite possibly the most destructive weapon we've ever seen."

"Not just that," the now inappropriately excited scientist was quick to add. "The potential for disaster is nearly incalculable. Power of this magnitude would have to be contained and monitored extremely carefully. If something went wrong, well, it wouldn't be just a planet to go up in flames, I'm sure."

The briefing room fell silent as these words were carefully considered. A decision had to be made and Robert Wesley already knew that he didn't like either one of his options. And yet he fully understood that those were the only ones available to him.

He finally looked towards Vincent. "As much as I hate the idea of getting involved with the internal affairs of an alien race which has already shown its xenophobic attitude, if they in fact possess the means to produce a weapon which could become a serious threat to the Federation, be it by their own doing or through it being acquired by a known hostile race like the Romulans, I believe it is our duty to investigate and learn as much as we can about it."

"Even if by doing so we'd be in violation of General Order One?" Vincent said skeptically.

"Yes, Doctor," Wesley said, now sounding completely confident in his decision. "Even if it violates the Prime Directive."

Agamemnon, 2372

She stepped out of the turbolift and was surprised to find the tall avian already waiting for her in the corridor, flanked by two of his security guards. She thought this to be odd as she believed to remember seeing him on the bridge before she had left and it now made her wonder how exactly he had managed to beat her all the way down to deck eight, already armed and with an assembled team at the ready.

"Captain, I would like to reiterate my request to place the ship on yellow alert," he said and then fell into step next to her, his two guards following behind.

"We had this conversation, Lieutenant," she said. "And you said it yourself, her one-man vessel poses no threat to *Agamemnon*."

"I am more concerned about the fact that we know next to nothing about this individual or her race. This is a potential first contact situation and we do not know what to expect. Additionally, this person has already made a threat against us."

She shook her head. "It wasn't a threat, Lieutenant. It was a warning."

"A semantic difference."

Maya smirked at that. Leave it to your chief of security to see a potential menace around every corner. "I have reason to trust this individual and that the warning she spoke of is not a threat specifically against this vessel but of a much more general variety."

At this the Aurelian actually turned his head towards the captain for the first time since they had set out down the corridor. His large blue eyes mirroring confusion. "I do not see how you could possibly know about these people, there is no record about their race in the Federation's cultural database."

"You ever consider that as the captain sometimes I might be privy to information you are not? Better get used to that."

It was obvious he didn't like that response. As the head of security Mer'iab felt it necessary to be amongst the best informed officers on the ship and Maya didn't fault him for that attitude. If it had been up to her she would have been more than happy to share everything she had learned about the Xenarth from Robert Wesley's classified log entries. Alas, it was not her call to make. The entire thing had been sealed to anyone below her security clearance in line with the Omega Directive.

Mer'iab didn't get a chance to utter another protest. Just as they turned a corner they spotted another team approaching the transporter room from the opposite direction.

Lieutenant Sh'Fane was leading two heavily armed Marines down the corridor.

The two teams met in front of the transporter room and before Maya could even open her mouth, Mer'iab had already placed himself in front of her captain in order to face the Andorian. His wings were slightly unfurled in what Donners had since learned was an indication of anxiety or anger.

"Lieutenant, what is the meaning of this? What are you doing here?" he said immediately, his voice clearly challenging.

Sh'Fane didn't respond well to his belligerent display and her muscles visibly tensed. "I'm here to provide security arrangements for the guest about to be transported onto the ship."

"No you're not," Mer'iab said before she had even finished talking. "This falls within my remit and I'm covering security arrangements. Your presence here is neither requested nor required."

"We had an arrangement, Lieutenant, and I am expecting you to follow –"

The Aurelian didn't let her finish. "The arrangement was for you to request any participation in ship's security matters to me in writing which you haven't done."

She frowned at this. "Difficult for me to do if you refuse to share information, Lieutenant. I had to find out about this meeting through the grapevine."

His wings fluttered a little in anger. "You are spying on ship operations now?"

Maya had just about enough and before the Andorian could come up with a retort, she promptly placed herself into the line of fire and between the two upset officers. "You cannot be serious," she barked, looking at the both of them. "I cannot have two department heads behaving like school

children fighting over access to the playground. Especially not the ones entrusted with providing security on this vessel. And certainly not moments before taking aboard a foreign dignitary. You are both way out of line."

"Sir," Mer'iab said, "I understand that we have had some disagreements but—"

"Shut up," she said and glared at the large avian. "I don't care about your disagreements right now. You don't think I have enough on my plate than to worry about the two of you being at each other's throats? We will have a conversation about this later. For now I expect both of you to send your people home."

Both the Marine and the security chief were about to protest but Maya wasn't going to have it. "You two can stay but I'm not beaming a foreign diplomat on board my ship just to face half an army. I trust the both of you can provide ample security," she said and then turned around on her heels and stepped into the transporter room. "And for God's sake," she said over her shoulder. "Try not to kill each other."

The two officers left it and glaring at each other instead. Then they quickly turned to their men and dismissed them before following the captain into the transporter room and taking up position by the door, standing about as far away from each other as possible.

Maya sighed and then focused on the person already waiting for her.

Lieutenant Commander Chen turned to face Donners and by the way his mandibles twitched in confusion, it was clear he wasn't quite certain what he was doing here. "Captain, you wanted me to be present for this. I admit I am uncertain why you would require an engineer for a first contact mission."

She gave him a smile. "This is no straight forward first contact, Commander. In fact it isn't a first contact at all. But I suspect you will understand shortly why I felt your presence here beneficial."

He moved his head sideways slightly and she understood this to be his approximation of a nod.

Then she turned to the transporter operator, a young Vulcan woman. "Ensign Saarik, do you have a lock on our guest?"

She looked up from her station. "Yes, sir. Ready for transport."

Maya faced the platform. "Energize."

The column of shimmering blue light quickly gave way to the solid form of a large creature which features not too different to Chen's. She

looked more humanoid than he did even with four arms instead of his two and less intricate mandibles but otherwise they were both clearly of insectoid origin.

Amaya took a cautious step towards the dais. "Queen Ket, welcome aboard *Agamemnon*. I'm Captain Donners."

Ket's large compound eyes were as difficult to read as those of her chief engineer but she was quite certain that they were focusing on her. "My sincere thanks for allowing me onto your vessel, Captain," she said, her feelers seemingly twitching in excitement.

"It is our honor to have you as our guest."

It didn't take long for her to notice the other persons in the room and as expected, the other insectoid immediately captured her full attention.

"Allow me to introduce my chief engineer, Commander Chen."

Ket stepped down from the platform and up to the engineer. "You are not human," she said.

"My race is called Xindi," he said. "We are made up of many subspecies which include humanoids, reptilians and aquatics. I'm part of the insectoid species."

"I was not aware of others like us in this part of space," she said.

Maya didn't miss that the fascination was two-sided. They stood surprisingly close, almost allowing their respective feelers to touch each other. She had to admit that it was much closer than she would have been comfortable with but apparently neither of them minded. In fact it almost appeared as if they were attracted to each other on some level.

"The Xindi originate in the Alpha Quadrant but since losing our home world a couple of centuries ago we have been a mostly nomadic race," he said. "There aren't many of us left today."

"We too lost our home world," she said. "It appears we have more in common than appears on the surface. I would greatly enjoy learning more about you and your people, Commander Chen."

"As would I of yours. I was also not aware of another insectoid species in this region."

Maya realized she had to butt in here. "It's a bit complicated, I'm afraid," she said, suddenly reconsidering the wisdom of having asked Chen to welcome the Xenarth on board. She had thought that it would perhaps put Ket at ease to meet somebody else like her but she hadn't expected the two of them to get along this well so quickly. Operational security and the implicit orders of the Omega Directive came back to mind.

“Perhaps we can arrange another meeting later. For now I’m afraid that Queen Ket and I will have to have other and more pressing business to discuss.”

The two insectoids turned to look at the captain, both appearing almost disappointed by her words.

Ket moved her head in a similar fashion as Chen used to do when he was in agreement. “You are of course quite correct, Captain,” she said.

“If you want to follow my officers, they’ll escort you to our observation lounge where we can talk further,” the captain said and pointed towards the doors.

Ket exchanged one last glance with Chen and something unspoken seemed to pass between them before she approached Sh’Fane. “You are an Andorian.”

The Marine nodded but was unable to entirely hide her confusion that a race she had never heard of before seemingly knew about her own. “That is correct, ma’am. If you’d like to follow us,” she said and stepped out of the transporter room, followed by the Xenarth and with a clearly annoyed Mer’iab making up the rear.

Maya couldn’t entirely blame the man for his disposition but she understood why Ket had naturally drifted towards the female instead.

Chen looked after the Xenarth and then glanced at Donners. “Captain, I am intrigued by our guest. I hope there will be a chance for me to be able to meet with her again.”

Maya looked pained. “No promises, Chen. This is a very delicate matter we are dealing with here, rife with far-reaching consequence and security concerns.”

His disappointment was not easily missed.

Maya sighed. “I see what I can do,” she added before she briskly walked out to follow Ket to the observation lounge.

* * *

Sh’Fane and Mer’iab didn’t like it but Donners insisted that they waited outside the briefing room and made sure that they were not disturbed.

Inside Wayne Daystrom had been waiting for Ket and the captain and he quickly jumped to his feet when they had entered. Amaya had

briefed the science officer on the most basic details on the Xenarth and their involvement with the Omega molecule, making him the only other person on board besides the captain to have any knowledge about Ket and her people. It hadn't been any easy decision to make for her but after already disregarding her orders in regards to sharing knowledge about the Omega molecule, she didn't feel she could make things much worse by letting him know about the Xenarth.

Daystrom and Ket exchanged greetings and then everyone took a seat around the conference table.

"It has always been a dream of mine to visit a Starfleet vessel, ever since I've learned about your people from Selphi. After her passing she entrusted me with her journals and records about her encounter with Robert Wesley and the *Lexington*. She spoke very highly of him and his crew and I find now that she didn't exaggerate at all."

Maya nodded. "Thank you, Queen Ket. It is high-praise to be compared to such a distinguished Starfleet officer as Commodore Wesley."

"I am curious however," she said. "Your crew does not appear to have any knowledge of my people."

Maya nodded. "After the *Lexington* encounter Starfleet felt it best to classify the mission and quarantine the Iota Crucis system. Not just because of your leadership's xenophobic tendencies but also due to the inherent dangers of the Omega molecule."

Daystrom uttered a low groan and Maya aimed a displeased look at the young man.

Ket however seemed in agreement. "A wise precaution, Captain. Another contact with the Federation after the events that took place during the *Lexington* visit could have been catastrophic for both our people."

"Like the *Lexington* we have been drawn to your world once again because we have detected the presence of the Omega molecule and considering what happened last time, naturally we are greatly concerned about this."

The Queen jerked her head in agreement. "And so you should be, Captain. Forces are at work on New Xenarth which mean to utilize these uncontrollable forces yet again, seemingly not having learned their lessons of the past, they believe they can use and control it to once more attempt to take us where they believe we truly belong."

"I was afraid of that," Maya said.

“Captain, if I may,” said science officer and then proceeded when he got the nod from Donners. “This could be a great opportunity for us. From what I have learned in the admittedly short period since you told me about the Xenarth, they have made incredible advances in synthesizing and stabilizing Omega even a hundred years ago. And we too have made leaps and bounds understanding the way this molecule works since then.”

She aimed a suspicious look at the man. “I’m not sure I like where this is going, Lieutenant.”

“Sir, you said yourself that you didn’t like the idea of suppressing knowledge the way Starfleet has done concerning this. Perhaps this is our chance to show them that there is another way. I’m not arguing that Omega isn’t dangerous but instead of trying to destroy it and risking alienating an entire race, perhaps now we can try and succeed where others have failed and in the process revolutionize the manner in which we produce energy.”

It was impossible to miss the passion in Daystrom’s plea or the notion that he had given this matter a great deal of thought since she had shared the details of *Lexington’s* mission to New Xenarth over a century ago. And once again Donners wasn’t sure if she hadn’t made a mistake of bringing him into her confidence regarding the Omega molecule.

She glanced at Queen Ket and while it wasn’t easy to read her insectoid facial features, she was certain that she too seemed concerned.

Maya desperately wanted to avoid the mistakes *Lexington* had made but at the same time she aspired to find a solution that had eluded Starfleet for over a century. A way to end this seemingly medieval ban on a promising technology for fear of its destructive power and at the same time hand the Federation and the entire known galaxy an energy source beyond everyone’s wildest dreams.

Amaya Donners couldn’t help wonder if it was indeed possible to sometimes have your cake and eat it too.

Agamemnon, 2372

“Lieutenant Redmond O’Shaughnessy?” said Maya Donners as she glanced over the padd and then looked to her right where Arden Texx was leaning casually against the bulkhead of her ready room.

He too held a padd and began to nod as soon as he had found the officer’s service jacket on his device. “Absolutely capable,” he said. “High recommendations from his last assignment. Also, won the Academy sharpshooting contest two years in a row.”

Maya turned her head to glance at the other two officers in the room.

Both Lure Mer’iab and Beatiar Sh’Fane stood at full attention in front of her desk, keeping their eyes focused straight ahead without making eye contact with either the captain or the first officer. They had remained in that uncomfortable position ever since they had been summoned there minutes earlier.

“What’s your impression of Mister O’Shaughnessy, Lieutenant Mer’iab?” she asked, glancing at the tall avian.

“The commander is correct, sir, he is a very capable officer and even though I have known him for only a few weeks, I would have to say that he has shown great potential in the security division,” he said. His voice betrayed at least a slight irritation as if he wasn’t entirely certain why he and his Marine counterpart had been asked to the captain’s office to discuss members of his team.

Maya nodded and glanced back at her padd. “Good,” she said and then found another personnel file. “How about Second Lieutenant Fabrizio Lombardi?”

The captain didn’t miss the small flicker that crossed Sh’Fane’s features.

“I like Fab,” said Texx. “Met him the other day in the crew lounge. Interesting factoid; he went to the same school as one of my younger

brothers. Very personable fellow when off-duty. We had a couple of drinks shared a few laughs, he's good people."

Maya smirked. "Okay, but is he a good Marine?" she said and her facial features hardened as she aimed a pointed look at the Andorian. "Lieutenant?"

"I would not have chosen Mister Lombardi as my executive officer if I were not completely convinced that he was a good Marine, ma'am. His off-duty antics notwithstanding," she said and allowed herself a quick look at a grinning Texx.

"I tell you something," he said. "He's definitely a lot more fun to talk to than certain people I know."

"Commander," Maya warned.

He held up a hand defensively. "Sorry."

The captain focused on the two officers standing at attention. "So do you think these candidates would be able to lead your respective teams then?"

That was enough to cause both the security officer and the Marine to exchange surprised glances before quickly focusing on the captain.

"I'm waiting."

Sh'Fane went first. "Lieutenant Lombardi has enough experience and training to take over the company," she said, her discomfort at answering the questions unmissable. "If circumstances required it."

"That is true for O'Shaugnessy and the security division as well," he said. "Should the need arise," he added quickly.

Maya grinned and leaned forward slightly. "That's good to hear. Because the way things are going I'm seriously considering having O'Shaugnessy and Lombardi replace you both as heads of your departments."

"Captain, you cannot be –"

"Serious?" she said and cutting off the avian in mid-sentence. "I'm dead serious, Lieutenant. The CINC is keeping close tabs on this little experiment we're running here personally and I'm not going to be the one telling Admiral Blackwell that this whole thing was a big waste of time because two of my senior officers were unable to work together."

"Captain, if I may –"

Donners was not going to let Sh'Fane get a word in. "You may not, Lieutenant. I want this to be perfectly clear. You are not irreplaceable. Don't get me wrong, I'm sure you're both perfectly capable officers in your

own right and extremely good at what you do. But to be frank, I neither have the time nor the inclination to keep you around if you cannot make this work. So, last chance. Get on the same page or I'll give somebody else the opportunity to dazzle me."

She let those words sink in for a moment and was gratified to see that they had been stunned into silence.

"Dismissed."

They snapped back to attention and then beat a quick retreat out of the ready room.

Maya sighed as soon as they had left. "I really don't like using threats as a motivator," she admitted.

"Sometimes it's the only thing that works. You were right, they're both good at what they do but they're also hopelessly wrapped up in their own egos that they cannot see that they're better together than on their own. A healthy dose of self-preservation may change that," said the Bolian first officer.

She offered him a little smile. "You've been spending too much time with our new counselor."

He shrugged. "The man knows what he's talking about."

"That he does," she said and then: "Don't tell him I said that. We have enough inflated egos on this ship."

"My lips are sealed."

Maya nodded and looked at the now closed doors. "You think they can make it work?"

Texx considered it for a moment. "I really hope so. Their second-in-commands are decent officers but they're not as good as they are. And something tells me we will need their specific skill sets before all this is over."

* * *

"Commander, may I have a word?"

Texx had only just stepped out of the turbolift and upon hearing the familiar voice, instead of slowing down, he actually hastened his pace.

It didn't discourage Tess Allenby who quickly caught up with the first officer.

"A little busy now, Lieutenant."

"I was just wondering, sir, what you have decided to do about Ensign DeSoto?"

"Do?" he said without slowing or gracing her with as much as a glance.

"You must have heard about the incident in the deflector room," she said and raised her previously injured hand even though none of the burns remained visible. "This is exactly the kind of thing I warned about. Due to the ensign's blatant negligence I've come to great personal harm. The man is a risk to himself and the rest of the crew."

The Bolian shot her a quick sidelong glance. "I wouldn't call second-degree plasma burns great personal harm."

"I was lucky," she said. "Next time I may not get away with something so superficial. I could have been killed, Commander."

Texx took a deep breath and then stopped and faced the operations officer.

"Something has to be done, sir. If you and the captain don't feel that he should be transferred, at this point I think you need to at least consider a temporary suspension of duty and –"

"Tess, I like you, I really do."

Her eyes grew wide at the unexpected personal tone. "Sir?"

"You're a very accomplished officer and from what I can tell you have a bright future ahead of you in Starfleet."

It didn't help to dispel her confused expression. "Uh ... thank you, sir."

"I would hate for you to throw that all away."

That hit a nerve and where she had looked puzzled before she was positively panicked now. Her career, it was obvious, was not just incredibly important to her, it was what she lived for. At least it was what she told herself, Texx thought as he considered the young blond-haired officer for a moment.

"I don't ... understand."

"Let me give you a little hint then," he said. "I've just come out of a meeting in which the captain has threatened two senior officers who shall go unnamed with relieving them of their duties because they have shown an unwillingness to work together as would be expected. Now what do you think would happen if you keep pushing your little dilemma with our helmsman until you give the captain no other choice?"

"But sir," she protested immediately. "I've tired to –"

“Have you really?”

That stumped her for a moment.

“Tess, the captain has just decided to brief the entire senior staff on what I understand to be a highly classified mission which may have severe consequences not just for her own career but if we fail, potentially for the entire sector,” the first officer said. “Do you really think anyone on this ship has the time to deal with your current spat with Ensign DeSoto?”

It was a rhetorical question of course.

“I need you to handle this yourself, Tess. And if you need my help with a solution that doesn’t involve somebody being thrown out of an airlock or re-assigned, you may come to me. Once this current mission is over. Until then, do your job and don’t let yourself get distracted.”

“I ...” she actually had no other words.

Texx gave her a nod. “Observation lounge in twenty. I’ll see you then,” he said and moved on, leaving Allenby by herself in the middle of the corridor, looking after the first officer with a pained expression on her face.

“Yes, sir,” she mumbled to herself.

Khazara, 2372

She would never have admitted it to Subcommander Rekar, the Tal Shiar liaison and her temporary second-in-command, but Commander Toreth felt anxious about operating on the wrong side of the Neutral Zone.

The last time her vessel had been outside the Empire a couple of years ago, it had ended rather badly for her, facing off with a Starfleet vessel and having been compromised by a Federation spy who had been in cahoots with her own people to smuggle defectors into Starfleet's waiting hands.

It had been an embarrassment from which she had not easily recovered. Her standing with the Imperial Guard had been severely damaged after that incident and it had bordered on a miracle that she had been able to cling to her command.

Her past experiences were not the only reason why she felt apprehensive over this mission. She had in fact voiced her protests to what she had been asked to do before they had set out, it wasn't as if she still had a reputation to defend, but it had fallen on deaf ears to both the Tal Shiar and Admiral Tomalak. It wasn't often that the Romulan intelligence community and high-ranking military officers saw eye-to-eye on anything but Toreth suspected that both parties saw this mission as their own means for redemption.

It had been less than a year that the ubiquitous intelligence service had been handed a sound and humiliating defeat by the Dominion in the Gamma Quadrant, a fact that the remaining Tal Shiar had tried to keep hidden from the general populace but had failed to keep a secret from many in the military.

And Tomalak had suffered his own series of embarrassments over the years, especially at the hands of Starfleet, which had many left wondering how exactly he had managed to get himself promoted to his current rank. Some had speculated that the Senate had felt that he could do

less damage to the Empire as a flag officer on Romulus than in command of a warbird patrolling the Neutral Zone.

Toreth knew that somebody had seriously underestimated the admiral's drive and ambition as well as his determination to try and deal the Federation payback for the humiliation he had endured at their hands.

"Commander, we are now entering our destination star system," said the uhlan in charge of piloting the majestic *D' deridex*-class warbird.

The ship lurched as it encountered sudden resistance to its forward momentum.

"Report," Toreth barked as she steadied herself in her chair.

"We are encountering increased gravimetric distortions the closer we get to our destination," the uhlan at the helm said.

Toreth uttered a heavy sigh. They had travelled at low warp for the last five hours to approach the Iota Crucis system and now that they had finally gotten close, another obstacle had been put into their path. "Tell engineering to double our output to the engines, I do not want to lose any more time than necessary. Keep us at full sub-light no matter what."

"Yes, sir," he said and began to contact the engineering compartment.

"We should be in communications range by now," said Sub-commander Rekar. "Hail the Xenarth and let me begin my negotiations."

The commander shot the man on her right a dark glare. Toreth had no love for the Tal Shiar and their overbearing officers, something that hadn't changed after she had been fooled by a Federation spy who had impersonated herself as a Tal Shiar agent on her ship. "Sub-commander, I do not know what kind of assignments you are used to and frankly I do not care," she said in a sharp tone. "On this vessel I am the person giving the orders and I will be carrying out the negotiations."

He took a step closer to her chair and spoke to her softly. "I do not care for your tone, Commander."

"Nor do I for yours," she said in an equally low tone. Her crew was well aware of her dislike for the Tal Shiar but she also understood that open conflict with Rekar could potentially lead to an early grave once this mission was over.

Rekar held his tongue, for now deciding it best to give the ship's commanding officer some leeway in carrying out the mission how she felt best. Toreth had no illusions that he would swoop in again once he thought that things were not proceeding in the best interest of the Tal Shiar.

"Centurion, have you established communications with the Xenarth leadership?"

The second officer nodded sharply. "It appears our intelligence reports were accurate, Commander and I have been able to open a direct link to Scholar Queen Klestra, the current leader of the Xenarth Aggregate."

Rekar had a self-satisfying smile on his lips. "You doubted the accuracy of our reports?"

"It wouldn't have been the first time the Tal Shiar was wrong," said Toreth.

The dark scowl on the intelligence officer's features told her that she had gone too far and she made a mental note to rein in her distaste for the man. She glanced back at her second officer. "Put her on screen, Centurion."

Moments later the distinctive insectoid face of a presumably female Xenarth appeared on the main viewer at the front of the bridge. It took all of Toreth willpower not to show her disgust for the clearly non-humanoid creature's appearance. She couldn't help herself, the Xenarth reminded her of the vile insect-like race which infested the Romulan world of Aranthka IX.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion? Who are you?" the female insectoid said with a noticeable clicking noise in her speech, her feelers twitching in angry excitement.

The commander rose from her chair. "My name is Toreth and I represent the Romulan Star Empire," she said. "We have observed your recent embrace of advanced technology with great interest and believe that you may be ready to become a significant ally to our people."

Toreth couldn't be certain, of course, but she thought those large and dark compound eyes considered her with suspicion. *"We have no interest of foreigners meddling with our affairs."*

She smirked at this. "I'm afraid you have no choice in this matter if you value your continued existence."

"You threaten us?"

Toreth quickly shook her head. "Absolutely not," she said resolutely. "I simply wish to warn you of the dangers of pursuing an isolationist policy in this region of space. You may not be aware of this yet, seeing that you have only recently developed technology able to probe deeper into space, but you are surrounded on all sides by powerful forces, some

reasonable and gracious like the Romulan Star Empire and some corruptive and hostile like the Federation.”

“The Federation,” she nearly spat. *“We have had dealing with them in the distant past.”*

That threw Toreth off for a moment and she allowed herself a quick glance towards Rekar. His reports had not indicated that the Xenarth had made previous contact with other races. As far as she had been told the Xenarth had been an insignificant pre-warp civilization until very recently when they had suddenly developed space-faring technology and more importantly commenced work on synthesizing a power source far beyond what even the scientists in the Empire had ever successfully achieved. To Toreth it had sounded like an improbable scenario from the first time she had heard of it and secretly she was pleased that the Tal Shiar had clearly not been as knowledgeable of Xenarth history as they had claimed.

That much was obvious upon studying Rekar’s now blank expression. But before he could suggest a remedy for this lack of intelligence, Toreth decided to gamble and she turned back towards the screen. *“So you must already know of their contemptible attempts to try and corrupt all people they encounter?”*

It was difficult to tell if she was on to something or not, the Xenarth’s face was not easily read and the queen remained silent.

“I expect that they have noticed your recent technological advancements just as we have and that they have dispatched an invasion force as we speak. However if you agree to ally yourself with us, the Star Empire will protect you from their meddling influence.”

“What guarantee do I have that you will not do the same?”

At that she smiled. It was a good-natured smile, one she had spent countless times practicing in her mirror. *“If you tell me now that you do not wish our assistance, that you’d rather deal with the Federation and their powerful military apparatus by yourself, I will order this ship to turn around immediately and we shall never bother you again,”* she said. She could hear a nervous Rekar take a step forward, clearly not happy about the way she was handling these so-called negotiations. She held up a hand towards him in a way that Klestra couldn’t see from her vantage point, keeping the Tal Shiar agent at bay. *“However, I must stress to you that this is the only offer of assistance that we shall make. We have our own resources to consider of which we expended quite a few to come here today and make you this proposal. If instead you wish to face the*

Federation by yourselves and you eventually realize that you do not like what they have to offer. The Star Empire will be in no position to help you fight off the foreign soldiers which by then will certainly have invaded your sovereign lands."

Queen Klestra uttered a number of clicking noises in quick succession. The fact that the translation matrix did not provide an interpretation in Romulan led Toreth to believe that those hadn't been actual words. The insectoid fell silent again for a moment, then glanced off screen before eventually focusing on the Romulan commander again. "*My predecessors were foolish,*" she said. "*They believed that they needed no allies while the Colony was at its weakest and most vulnerable. Then, when we were almost destroyed because of Federation intercession we turned away from the very technology which could have made us great again. I will not let the past repeat itself. The Xenarth will once again rise as a power to be reckoned with.*"

Toreth was in the inevitable position in which she had no clear understanding as to what the insectoid queen was referring to. Clearly there was much more to the Xenarth than the Tal Shiar had been able to learn. She decided to go along with it. "The Romulan Star Empire can help you to achieve greatness again, Queen Klestra. All the Federation has ever been interested in is to keep those they conquer and corrupt in line with their narrow-minded morals and ideology. We on the other hand want to see you fulfill your entire potential."

"*You are welcome to approach New Xenarth,*" she said. "*And we shall discuss your proposed alliance in more detail.*"

Toreth smiled. "I'm looking forward to meeting you in person, Queen Klestra."

That smile and appearance of confidence disappeared from her face along with the image of the insectoid on the screen as she let herself sink back into her command chair.

Any reasonable observer may have guessed that Toreth knew exactly what she was doing. The truth however was that she was heavily improvising. Neither Tomalak nor Rekar had told her much about the true nature of this mission nor what it was exactly that made the Xenarth so valuable as to risk open confrontation with the Federation. She hated to be left in the dark and she was determined to remedy this situation as soon as possible.

Lexington, 2267

"The swarm ships have detected us and are altering course. Two minutes to intercept," said Terrence Lawford while peering through the sensor hood on the navigation console.

"Steady as she goes, Ensign," said Wesley, once more staring intently towards the screen where a small cluster of flickering space indicated the presence of hundreds of tiny ships heading straight for *Lexington*. The commodore toggled his comm unit. "G'arv, are the shield modifications ready?"

"Ready as they'll ever be," he responded sharply. *"They should hold for about five minutes. After that all bets are off."*

"Bring the shield online and siphon every last drop of power you can spare into the grid."

Not a moment later the lights on the bridge noticeably dimmed and Wesley could hear the telltale sounds of power being rerouted from all non-essential systems around him.

"Shields are up," Lawford said.

"How long until we reach the planet?" Wesley wanted to know.

"Four minutes and thirty-two second until standard orbit if we maintain full impulse," said Zha'Thara.

This prompted the first officer to step next to his captain and slightly lean into him. "No guarantee they will let up once we get there," he said in a whispered tone of voice which for the man known as the Bear turned out to be not much of a whisper at all.

Wesley simply nodded, already fully cognizant of the risks inherent to this plan.

"Here come the bugs," said Aliz Bathory and instinctively held on to her console.

She didn't need to have bothered. The shield modifications held and while *Lexington* began to shake and tremble once more, it was much gentler this time around.

"They're on top of us and opening fire. Shields are holding but not for their lack of trying," said the Andorian who monitored the swarm ship's effort through her sensor viewer.

Wesley turned in his chair until he faced Oudekirk, sitting behind him and next to the turbolift entrance. "Lieutenant, any sign of communication from the planet?"

The Dutch woman held her earpiece a little tighter and manipulated a few buttons on her console as she looked over her shoulder. "I'm picking up a lot of chatter between the swarm ships and Iota Crucis IV. I cannot make out what they're saying yet but the UT is starting to catch on. Whatever they are saying to each other, it has become a lot more urgent in the last few minutes."

"They're getting nervous," said Kuznetsov.

"Can you blame them?" said the science officer, turning from her own station. "They have an unknown, well-armed and seemingly unstoppable ship on direct course to their world. I'd be nervous, too."

Wesley considered that for a moment and then nodded. "They see us as a threat," he said and then to Oudekirk. "Open another channel, Lieutenant, this time directed towards the planet."

She gave him a quick nod to know he could speak.

"Attention, this is Commodore Robert Wesley from the Federation starship *Lexington*. We come in peace and only wish to talk to you. We do not have hostile intentions. I say again, we come in peace."

He waited a moment and then looked back at the comm officer. But she shook her head. There had been no apparent reply.

"If we can't understand them yet, perhaps they can't understand us," the first officer said.

"Keep sending that message in a continuous loop. Perhaps their translators are more efficient than ours."

Oudekirk nodded and went to work.

Just then the bridge trembled harshly almost causing Ketteract to be thrown to the deck before he could grab hold of the railing. "God, I thought those shields were going to hold,"

"This is what you asked us to do, Doctor," Kuznetsov said, showing zero sympathy for the man. "Get to this planet, no matter what."

"The swarm ships have picked up the pace, sir," said the Andorian after checking her readings. "I don't think we have as much time as we thought."

Moments later Commander G'arv from engineering put a much finer point to it. *"Bridge, whatever we're doing, we're making them angry. We don't have enough juice in our circuits to keep those shield modifications up for more than a minute or so. Commodore, I strongly suggest a new course of action or you won't have a ship left to worry about."*

Bob Wesley left his chair and stepped up right behind Cilla Oudekirk as if his physical proximity to the communications console could will the other end to respond to their hails. "Anything on the UT yet?"

She shook her head. "Sorry, sir. It's having a tough time with the alien syntax."

Lexington's captain looked back at the screen where he could see nothing but a moving mass of black and brown which had completely enveloped his ship. He had to steady himself by holding on to the back of Oudekirk's chair as the deck plates under his feet trembled with increasing severity. He thought he could see specks of the sepia-colored planet not far beyond the bug ships.

"We're beginning to lose main power," said Zha'Thara and as if to stress her point, the bridge lights began to dim further. A few non-essential consoles went completely dark, startling the officers manning them.

The first officer found Wesley's eyes. "Fight or flight time?"

Wesley nodded and then looked back towards Oudekirk. "Open the channel again."

"Channel open."

"Attention, this is to whoever can hear me on Iota Crucis IV. We will not be deterred to reach your planet even if you are successful in destroying us in the process."

This caused a few bridge officers to shoot their captain, the man they trusted with their very lives, surprised glances. Some even gasped openly, not having expected this to become a suicide run.

Most telling of all perhaps was Bendes Ketteract, who judging by his confused facial expression wasn't quite sure how he should feel about being killed in pursuit of a scientific excursion he himself had practically demanded.

"But note this: If you are successful in destroying this vessel, many more will come to investigate and you will be unable to defend yourself

against a dozen ships similar to this one. Your desperate attempts to remain isolated will fail.”

The bridge fell silent except for the increasing sounds of the battered shields and a ship sailing through rough and worsening waters. Most eyes remained on Oudekirk who frantically tried to send and resend the commodore’s last message through whatever channels she could open quickly enough.

G’arv’s angry voice pierce the silence. *“Bridge, you’ve had better made peace with your creator. Shields are failing.”*

One bridge console after the next began to explode in a spark of flames and a number of officers were thrown from their seats. But as quickly as the chain reaction had begun did it cease again.

And then, as if having cleared a storm, the deck plates stopped rattling and their ride smoothed out. Like dissipating clouds, the swarm ships disengaged to allow a clear view on Iota Crucis IV now just a few hundred kilometers away.

Alexei Kuznetsov couldn’t help himself and an uncharacteristically large grin spread over his face. “Remind me never to play poker with you, Commodore.”

Wesley gave him a blank look in response. “Who said I was bluffing?” he said and headed back to his chair.

Ketteract couldn’t stop his jaw from hanging wide open, not able to quite process how close he had come to being killed before ever getting a chance to get a good look at his wonder particles.

Zha’Thara however seemed to know better and her little smile seemed to give away that she had never once doubted Wesley and his ability to get them through that rough patch in one piece.

“Commodore, we are being hailed,” a clearly relieved Oudekirk announced.

“Put it on screen, Lieutenant,” Wesley said after he had settled in his chair again, looking as stone-faced and professional as ever.

The main viewer shifted for a moment and then displayed an entirely alien face. The person on the screen, and no one on *Lexington’s* bridge could tell for certain if it was a person at all, male or female for that matter, possessed a body which appeared to have more in common with a large insect than a human. Its toughened skin appeared more like an exoskeleton in some places. Its oblong head had two huge and pitch black eyes which were positioned at its sides. Two v-shaped feelers protruded from its

frontal lobes and not too far below sat two large mandibles which looked razor-sharp. Most of the rest of the creature's body was hidden but it did appear to have at least four arms.

The bridge crew stared at the screen with poorly hidden surprise and disgust.

"It's hideous," said Aliz Bathory under her breath before she could even think about her words.

"Ensign, belay that," Wesley said sharply.

"Sorry," she mumbled and then forced herself to look down at her station instead.

The creature didn't appear to have noticed the outburst but instead began to talk in an urgent series of clicks and tones which were incomprehensible to Wesley and his crew. From the way its mandibles and antennae twitched, the insect-like creature was furious.

"Lieutenant, the universal translator," said he commodore without ever taking his eyes off the creature.

"Coming online now," she said. "I think it made a breakthrough."

No sooner had she spoken, the previously strange voice began to make sense. "... *sovereign territory of the Xenarth Colony. You are to turn around immediately and leave this system or face destruction,*" said the creature with what the universal translator had clearly interpreted as a female sounding voice.

"I apologize for the intrusion and I assure you we have no hostile intentions against you and your people. My name is Robert Wesley and I represent the United Federation of Planets. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

The creature on the screen seemed to ponder those words for a moment, as if considering if they were even worth her response. "*You are addressing Warrior Queen Quelphi, representative of the Xenarth Aggregate. You have five lirkiks to turn your vessel around and leave our space before I will order your destruction.*"

If Wesley was intimidated by the threat he did an impressive job of hiding it. Instead he only looked more resolute as he leaned forward in his chair, displaying a much more relaxed and comfortable image of himself compared to his agitated counterpart. "Queen Quelphi, I am not certain if you appreciate our situation. According to our records, the planet which you are currently occupying is uninhabited and within the borders of our

Federation. So you see, it is in fact you who has intruded into our space and I am duty bound to investigate this matter fully."

This seemed to irritate Quelphi further. *"This is not our concern. This planet and this system have now been rightfully claimed by the Xenarth Colony,"* she stopped herself and looked off-screen as if somebody there had caught her attention. Then with something akin to a frown she turned back to face Wesley. *"You will hold your position until I contact you again. Failure to follow these instructions will lead to your annihilation."* The channel was closed with no further notice.

The commodore turned his chair to face his senior officers. "Thoughts?"

"She's aggressive," said the first officer immediately. "As you would expect from somebody with the title of Warrior Queen. But unsure of herself, that much seemed obvious. Like she knows she doesn't belong here."

Wesley nodded. "The question is then, where did they come from and why did they choose to come here? If they had a choice in the matter, that is," he said and then looked at his science officer next.

"Fascinating, as my Vulcan colleagues would say. They are a species of highly-evolved insectoids with a social structure not unlike more primitive anthropoid life-forms. The fact that she referred to herself as a warrior queen seems to imply that she is merely one of many other similar queens to make up their ruling establishment. Judging by the way she seemed to defer to somebody else, I'd say she isn't the leader or at least not in a position to make final decisions by herself."

"Commodore, may I remind you that this isn't an anthropological survey. We're here to investigate the energy radiation that may very well be prepared for a weapon of imaginable power even as we speak," said Ketteract, once more injecting himself into the conversation without a second thought.

"I haven't forgotten, Doctor. But in order to learn more about these energy readings, first we have to gain these people's trust and that means learning more about them."

"Sir, they are hailing us again," Oudekirk said.

"Put her on, Lieutenant," he said and swiveled his chair around again to face the main viewer.

Quelphi reappeared. *"Robert Wesley, do you intend to challenge our claim to this world?"* she said bluntly.

“On the contrary,” he responded without missing a beat. “I’m perfectly willing to open negotiations between your people and mine so that we can come to a mutually beneficial agreement.”

That seemed to have thrown off the warrior queen who had apparently not expected this response. Wesley quickly understood that Quelphi was exactly who she claimed to be. She was a warrior and certainly not a diplomat.

“We are mostly curious about the events which have brought you to this place. We have detected strange and unknown energy readings emanating from your world and would like to learn more about yourself and this energy you employ.” No sooner had he said this, Robert Wesley came to regret his words. He knew almost immediately that he had pushed too far, too quickly.

The Warrior Queen’s renewed signs of alarm were obvious. *“None of this is your concern and we are not interested in sharing any knowledge with you. I repeat my previous ultimatum. You now have –”*

Wesley decided to become more bullish himself, interrupting this latest threat before it could be fully formed. “This is not getting us anywhere. As I have pointed out, you are technically *our* guests. I have shown my willingness to open friendly negotiations with you but if you are unwilling to do so you will leave me no choice but to summon my fleet which will treat you as the intruder that you are.”

This prompted another look to somewhere off screen and whatever was transpiring between Quelphi and persons unknown seemed to disturb the Warrior Queen even more. Finally she turned back towards Wesley. *“What is it you propose?”*

The captain of the *Lexington* fought the urge to reveal a triumphant smile. “I propose a face-to-face meeting to discuss this situation further. Myself and a small number of my crew could meet your official representatives on the surface –”

“Unacceptable.”

Wesley nodded slowly almost as if he had expected this response. “Very well. In that case perhaps you would like to join us on board of my ship to open our negotiations.”

The fact that she didn’t dismiss this out of hand gave Wesley hope.

“Agreed. Expect our representative to join your vessel shortly. You will maintain your position and make no further attempts to approach this planet or you will be –”

“Annihilated. Yes, I get the drift.”

Queen Quelphi feelers twitched angrily one more time and then she disappeared from the view screen again.

“Is this a bad time to point out that I used to burn ants with a magnifying glass when I was a kid?” said Lawrence with a smirk.

Wesley stood from his chair. “Listen up folks,” he began, his voice carrying his usually firm and authoritarian tone across the bridge. “I appreciate that these Xenarth look strange and alien to us and that they have an undeniable resemblance to certain insects we may not be particularly fond of. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that these are sentient and clearly highly-intelligent beings. As Starfleet officers it is our mission to respect all life, no matter what form it takes. I expect you all to live up to those ideals while we negotiate with these people.”

Lawrence and Bathory looked sufficiently chastised and apologetic for their remarks even if the commodore had not singled them out as he spoke to the bridge. Instead it had been the Bear who had shot them both warning glances, making it perfectly clear that he would hold them accountable for whatever inappropriate remarks came over their lips. It was a warning not to be taken lightly.

But Wesley was happy to leave it at that. He had made his views clear and expected no further problems. “Commander Zha’Thara, I want you and Doctor Ketteract to start scanning the planet and the surrounding space for any signs of this mysterious energy. Inch-by inch if necessary. Learn whatever you can from your sensors.”

The Andorian nodded and went straight to work. Ketteract on the other hand did not appear to be satisfied and shook his head. “That’s not going to be enough. We need to get down there and analyze the source of these readings up close.”

“One step at a time, Doctor. For now, find out what you can from here and I’ll see what I can do to make sure you get your name written into the history books,” he said with a dry sarcasm which apparently was lost on the scientist but not on his first officer who couldn’t keep that smirk off his face.

Agamemnon, 2372

“Hard to believe that Starfleet has been able to keep this a secret for over a hundred years,” said Vej after Maya had briefed her senior staff on exactly what they were up against.

It had not been an easy decision to make and in truth she hated the idea that her first significant command decision after receiving her captaincy had been to violate her orders.

She blamed her counselor. After all it had been after one of her regular sessions with Vej and following his advice to study Commodore Wesley’s classified logs of his own encounter with the Omega molecule, that she had started to believe that she had no choice but to bring in the rest of her senior staff.

Maya aimed a pointed look at the Ullian who sat to her immediate left in *Agamemnon’s* spacious observation lounge, after he had been the first to speak up. Vej’s inclusion in this meeting could have been seen as an especially grievous disregard of the Omega Directive considering that he wasn’t even a Starfleet officer. As far as she was concerned, she valued his opinion the most.

He understood the look for what it was. “A secret which naturally shall remain absolutely safe with me.”

She nodded and turned to the rest of her crew, most of which were still focusing on the wall-mounted screen which showed as much information about Omega as Amaya had been comfortable sharing with her crew and she hadn’t held back much. After all if she needed her crew’s help in dealing with this, there was little point in keeping them ignorant of what Omega was or what it could do.

Judging by their faces, they were all astonished of learning of this immeasurably powerful particle’s existence.

Chen, who Maya noted had chosen a seat next to their Xenarth guest, seemed especially interested in learning about this new power source

which was hardly a surprise considering his profession. "The practical applications of a stabilized Omega molecule must be close to infinite," he said as he mandibles clicking excitedly. "It could revolutionize the way we power our starship, our planets and open up possibilities we've never even thought off before."

"Its power is unquestionable," said Queen Ket. "My people used it to travel many thousands of light-years in a mere instant."

Most eyes in the room focused on the Xenarth with amazement.

"How is that possible?" said Doctor Sessar-Rass

"We call it the Star Portal," she said. "Forgive me for I cannot provide you with a technical explanation as to its operation but the device, along with this power source were the means with which we came to be on New Xenarth."

"Astonishing," said Allenby. "I've heard of the Iconian gateways but I suppose this puts even that technology to shame."

If Lure Mer'iab was as excited by these revelations as the rest of the senior staff, he did a good job at hiding it behind his stern, avian visage. "What about military applications? Weaponizing this molecule could make any power in the quadrant unstoppable."

"Until your enemies get their hands on it," said Sh'Fane who sat at the opposite side of the room, no doubt on purpose. "Then what you get is a war of attrition with collateral damage in epic proportions."

The security chief shook his head without gracing the Marine with a look. "Not necessarily. With two or more nations in possession of weapons of this magnitude, it could result in a balance of power in which the mere presence of such weapons creates a mutual deterrent for war."

"Right," she said sarcastically. "And that's a good thing because?"

The avian noticeably ruffled his feathers in a sign of annoyance before glancing her way. "I did not say that this was a preferable outcome but simply a possibility," he said and then focused on the captain. "My tactical assessment is that the mere existence of such a weapon would pose a great threat to galactic security and stability."

Maya nodded.

"I disagree."

All eyes turned towards Wayne Daystrom but the sudden attention did not seem to bother the young and barrel-chested science officer. "And I think it is a mistake to allow ourselves to merely think of the dangers of a new discovery and let that determine our entire approach to it. There is no

doubt the Omega molecule can be dangerous but at the same time it can be so incredibly valuable that we cannot allow our fears to blind us to its potential. Starfleet has kept this a secret for a hundred years but no matter how hard you try to keep something hidden, we all know it will come to light eventually. Why not reveal this now? In a controlled manner and on our terms. As Commander Chen has pointed out, the potential of what this could mean to the Federation, the entire galaxy even, is staggering.”

Maya had worried about precisely this. Daystrom, by now, had had plenty of time to give the matter further thought, and considering his history with Omega and his own reservations which he had raised when she had first approached him, it came as little surprise that he would try again, this time with an audience. Of course there was no doubt in her mind that his carefully rehearsed speech had been addressed at her while trying to pick up supporters in the senior staff.

“Lieutenant, this is neither the time nor the place to discuss Federation policy,” said Texx. “Even if we wanted to, we are not in a position to influence Starfleet’s strategy on this Omega molecule.”

Maya was about to jump in to fully agree with her first officer when Daystrom beat her to it. “Why not? How else do you change something that is so blatantly wrong? You have to start somewhere and it might as well be here,” he said, his voice beginning to reflect the passion he felt for this issue. “And surely Starfleet listens to their captains,” he said and then focused in on Donners at the head of the conference table. “If you were to tell them –”

She interrupted him. “Let me stop you there, Wayne,” she said with a little smile. “I’m flattered that you think I have such influence but the truth is that you have a rather exaggerated view of my importance within the halls of powers. May I remind you that I’ve been a starship captain for less than a week.” She shook her head. “I’m afraid I haven’t earned my right to tell Starfleet what to do and rightly so. And quite honestly I doubt even the most accomplished Starfleet officer in the fleet would be able to change the way Command feels about this.”

Daystrom was clearly not satisfied with his response. “We can at least try,” he said. “If we all just give up before even attempting to change the wrongs of the galaxy then nothing will ever change.”

The captain stood from her chair and she felt every set of eyes in the room follow her as she walked over to the screen which continued to display the details on this controversial particle. Next she glanced out of

the sloped and forward-facing viewports, staring out into space for a moment and towards their destination. Then she faced her assembled senior crew. "Let's be clear about this," she said. "I am not entirely certain that this Omega Directive is the wrong way to deal with something so enormously powerful."

"Destroying what we do not understand?" the science officer said. "How does that not go against everything we've been led to believe Starfleet stands for?"

She nodded slowly to accede to that point. "Starfleet is also responsible for the well-being of billions of life-forms all across the known galaxy and sometimes that means to make difficult and uncomfortable decisions," she said and immediately held up a hand as Daystrom was looking to butt in again. "The dangers of Omega are well-documented and plain to see to anyone who has studied it. They simply outweigh the potential benefits and that is the reason this decision has been made. Am I perfectly comfortable with withholding information and aggressively destroying Omega wherever we may encounter it? Of course not. But I understand how it is not a decision for any of us to make. And I'm thankful for that."

She let her gaze wander across the room until it fell on Vej who looked at her with a somewhat troubled expression. Maya immediately understood why. Her speech notwithstanding, he understood better than anyone else in the room that she was incredibly torn on this issue herself and that as a result she had not been as convincing in her argument as she should have been. She had allowed her own doubts to shine through and allowed this conversation to go on for much longer than may have been wise. Perhaps a more veteran starship captain would have ended this entire debate much sooner and much more resolutely.

"If I may speak?" said Queen Ket.

Maya was thankful for the distraction and graced the insectoid with a warm smile. "You do not require permission. Please go ahead."

The Xenarth considered Daystrom first but then addressed all the people at the table. "I cannot hide my amazement over your open dialogue which this matter has invited. It would be something unthinkable among my own people, specifically after the Aggregate has made a decision on how to proceed. I find this refreshing. However, I would be remiss if I did not allow you to see my own perspective on what my people call the Xendaru particle. Our scholars have studied it in great detail for many

generations, much longer I presume than your own. And ever since the days we have first discovered it, we have attempted to utilize its awesome potential. I am not a scholar but I can tell you that the sacrifices, both in lives and resources that we have had to pay have been near incalculable. And when we were finally at a stage at which we thought it could be safely utilized we found ourselves at the brink of collapse following an invasion by an alien force more powerful than anything we had ever encountered before. We were left with no choice but to use Xendaru to try an escape from their single-minded aim to secure it for themselves. Millions of my people perished defending our world and millions more when the Star Portal failed to transplanted the entirety of the Colony to New Xenarth."

It took a moment to let Ket's abridged Xenarth history sink in with the officers around the table.

It was Mer'iab who spoke first. "This alien race that attacked you, do you know who they were?"

Texx stepped in. "I think we should remain focused on the core message of the Xenarth's experience with Omega."

Maya sat back in her chair. "Agreed," she said and focused on the insectoid. "It's disturbing to hear that after everything your people have been through they would attempt to risk everything yet again by synthesizing this molecule a second time."

Ket jerked her head sideways in a sign of her agreement. "It is the reason I have sought you out, Captain. I'm hoping that together we can avoid repeating the same mistakes."

She nodded but then her facial expressions hardened. "We have something called the Prime Directive," she said. "It means that we are not allowed to interfere with other races' internal matters and developments. This Omega Directive overrides this but you have to understand that the Prime Directive is one of our most important rules and has been drilled into us since the very first day we attended the Academy. We have all sworn an oath to uphold it. It will not be easy for any of us to try and stop your people while finding a way of least interference."

"Nor has it been easy for me to seek you out, Captain, and ask your help to turn against my own kin."

Maya immediately felt somewhat ashamed of not having considered Ket's own sacrifice before. She was risking everything by coming here and asking for Starfleet's help.

"I can only imagine how hard this is for you, Ket," said Chen as he focused on the fellow insectoid and beating the captain to stress her support. "I am certain that Captain Donners and this crew will do whatever we can to prove that your trust in us has not been misplaced."

"I wholeheartedly agree," Maya said.

The Artisan Queen appeared grateful for the sentiment.

"The question then, ladies and gentlemen," said the captain, "is how do we help Queen Ket and the Xenarth to avoid potentially destroying themselves and half the quadrant along with it?"

Daystrom as expected looked pained by that question and Maya immediately noticed. "Lieutenant," she said, addressing him directly. "As difficult as this may be for you, we will rely on your expertise with Omega to try and neutralize it."

To his credit he didn't delay his response. "Of course, sir. You will have it."

She didn't miss his sudden stiffness or the neutral tone in his voice but decided that it had to be good enough for now.

Texx regarded the Artisan Queen. "What can you tell us about the location of the Omega facility?"

"Supreme Klestra is not as careless as our leadership had been when we first meddled with this power. She made the wise precaution to move the facilities charged with synthesizing the particles onto our moons. To my knowledge there are two expansive facilities, one on each of our largest satellites."

"Considering the unstable nature of the Omega particle and the destructive force it may unleash in an accident I recommend a ground assault," said Beatiar Sh'Fane.

Maya turned to look at the security chief, fully expecting a harsh rebuke from the avian.

"I agree that it is our best option."

Maya and Arden Texx exchanged surprised looks at finding the Marine and the security chief in agreement for once.

"And considering the scope of the operation we would probably require a combined force of security personnel and Marines," he continued.

The captain suppressed the urge of cracking a wide smile at Mer'iab's statement. She found that the Andorian wasn't quite able to and she noticed the tiniest of smirks on her lips. Perhaps the first she had ever seen on the serious woman's face. It was gone in a flash.

"I'd be happy to produce a full assault plan," she said after the brief moment of amusement had passed.

Mer'iab's head jerked into her direction, clearly not pleased by her initiative.

Maya spoke up before the little détente between the two officers could be undone by another confrontation. "I need you two to work together on an assault strategy as soon as we have a better idea what we are up against and we have a plan on how to neutralize Omega. To be clear, this is a contingency plan only at this point. I have no intentions of carrying out a full assault unless there is no other way to persuade the Xenarth Aggregate to discontinue Omega-related research. I'd much rather find a peaceful—"

The shrill alert klaxon warbling through the speakers cut her short.

"Red alert. Captain, please report to the bridge," the voice of Bobby DeSoto called out over the blaring sound of the alarm.

Maya was up and out of her chair in less than a second and already heading towards the exit. The rest of her officers were close behind.

* * *

A surprisingly tense Bobby DeSoto turned from where he stood in the middle of the bridge to face Amaya Donners as she stepped into the room with the senior officers following closely.

"Report," she said as she made her way towards her chair.

"We've just detected another ship near Iota Crucis IV," he said and then quickly stepped up to the helm station, clearly eager to resume his normal post and leave the captain to deal with whatever he had discovered.

"Romulan Warbird," Lure Mer'iab said before he had reached the tactical station even if by now few had to be told after seeing the imposing emerald-colored starship looming large on the main view screen. Most were fully aware that the warbird was just as threatening as its huge size and aggressive design implied.

"The Romulan vessel is still over twenty AU away. At our present maximum speed of full impulse we wouldn't be within weapons range for at least another eleven hours," said Allenby after taking her own seat and bringing up the sensor information. She shot the helmsman a telling look. "Hardly a reason to call red alert."

Texx came to the young officers defense. "Better safe than sorry."

DeSoto aimed a grin at Allenby which she responded to by rolling her eyes, an exchange which went unnoticed by the rest of the bridge crew.

"Agreed," said Maya, "but let's stand down from red alert and switch to yellow. I don't want to come into this with an overly aggressive posture."

Texx, sitting next to her, hit the right panels on his console and the alert klaxons and flashing red lights died away to be replaced by a much gentler amber glow.

Amaya considered the deceptively large image of the Romulan Warbird on screen. As a Starfleet officer assigned to starships and bases she had faced opponents in battle countless times over her career but never before as the person ultimately responsible for an entire ship and her crew. This would be her first real test as a commanding officer and the notion of having to take her ship into battle so soon after taking command was not a pleasant one. It would be a test not just of her abilities to lead but also of *Agamemnon* and how her crew would perform under pressure.

She couldn't resist a quick glance at the display integrated into her armrest to find out the overall response time to the red alert. She was pleasantly surprised to find that the crew had reacted swiftly to prepare for battle stations in what marked a clear improvement over the times achieved during initial drills. She made a mental note to congratulate Chief Holly at coming through on his promise to whip the crew into shape.

They had prepared for the worst for the last few days. Now it was time to put all that practice into action and hope for the best.

"Head-to-head, Lieutenant," Texx asked the security chief. "What's your tactical analysis?"

"In pure offensive capabilities we're probably just about even," said the avian. "I'd give us a slight edge thanks to better speed and maneuverability. There is no definitive precedent of a battle considering our current circumstances and my suggestion would be to avoid setting one. But if it were to come to a fight, I'm confident we could win. It would make for a good measure of our own abilities."

The Bolian smirked and looked at the captain. "You have to appreciate the aplomb."

"If we're looking at a battle here," said Vej, "we might help start something the Federation can ill afford. Last time I checked we're not on

the best of terms with the Klingons and the Dominion is not exactly crazy about us either."

Maya nodded in agreement. "We don't need to make any more enemies," she said. "Let's see if we can put off testing all our fancy offensive weapons to another day."

"These Romulans," Queen Ket said from where she stood near the science station, "our people have not come across them before. Are they as dangerous as you seem to imply?"

"They're not the kind of people who are likely to invite you over for dinner," said DeSoto without taking his eyes off his station. "And if they do, it's probably because you're on the menu."

The Xenarth considered the young helmsman curiously, apparently not following.

Texx was quick to help. "What Ensign DeSoto is clumsily trying to explain, Queen Ket, is that the Romulans are first and foremost looking out for their own interests. They are indeed a very powerful empire and you are lucky not to have had previous run-ins with them before considering that their border is only a stone's throw away from here."

"If they are here now, violating the Neutral Zone this blatantly, it's only because they see an opportunity for themselves which is tempting enough to disregard previous agreements," said the security officer.

Maya shuddered at the idea of what that meant exactly. "Then let's find out, shall we? Hail the warbird, Lieutenant."

It didn't take long for them to respond. A middle-aged, female Romulan officer with a sharp military haircut sat comfortably in her throne-like command chair on her bridge, her posture and body language just relaxed enough to show that she had been expecting this call and was prepared for it. "*My name is Commander Toreth of the Imperial Romulan Warbird Khazara. I extend cordial greetings to our friends in the Federation. May I inquire as to your business in this system?*"

Maya couldn't help but envy the seemingly effortless manner in which the other woman presented herself and she knew that as much as she wanted to emulate it, her own body language and tone was likely coming across much more rigid. "Commander Toreth, I'm Captain Amaya Donners of the *Agamemnon*. I must say I'm surprised to find a Romulan vessel on this side of the Neutral Zone. You may not be aware of this but this system lies within the sovereign territory of the Federation."

Toreth feigned surprise. *"Within the Federation you say? How odd. My records show that Starfleet has avoided this part of space for over one-hundred years."*

Maya cracked a humorless smile. "Regardless of our past deployments, you will find Iota Crucis to be firmly within Federation territory to which the Romulan Empire has never made a legitimate claim. So you must forgive me for asking what would make you decide to enter this system unsolicited."

"I am saddened that you would think so little of us to believe we would come here uninvited, Captain."

Maya frowned. "I don't understand," she said and immediately regretted the phrase which put a wide smile of triumph onto Toreth's own face, momentarily shifting this conversation into her favor. Maya was painfully reminded that every interaction with a Romulan, even a verbal one, was akin to battle itself.

"I'd be more than happy to educate you, Captain. What you call Iota Crucis IV is in fact inhabited by a sentient race called the Xenarth who have no interest whatsoever to have any business with the Federation. Now remind me if I'm wrong, Captain, but doesn't current Federation policy allow sovereign races to make up their own mind about their allegiances? Within your territory or otherwise."

Maya didn't take the bait this time. "Are you trying to imply that the Xenarth have chosen to align themselves with the Romulan Star Empire? Voluntarily?"

Now Toreth looked offended. *"I do not care for your implication, Captain. And to answer your question; yes, they have indeed. The Xenarth have chosen to become allies of the Star Empire and therefore now enjoy our protection."*

Ket stepped forward. "Our people would not choose to ally themselves with a foreign power so easily."

The Romulan Commander glanced at the insectoid. *"And you are?"*

"Artisan Queen Ket of the Xenarth Aggregate. I speak for my people."

"Ket," she said as if remembering the name from somewhere before focusing on Donners again. *"Captain, are you aware that you are sheltering a Xenarth criminal and traitor to her people on your ship? I know that no formal extradition treaty exists between our two nations but on the behalf of the Xenarth Colony, we would be extremely grateful if you turned this fugitive over into our care so that we may return her to her people to face punishment for her crimes."*

The Artisan Queen's agitation was palpable as she her mandibles clicked nervously and her feelers stood at attention. "I am no traitor."

"I am not interested in arguing Xenarth politics with a criminal," Toreth responded icily and looked at Donners, eagerly awaiting her decision.

"Do you expect me to take all this at face value, Commander?" she said. "That the Xenarth just happen to ally themselves with you and declared one of their own leaders an outlaw?"

The smile on the Romulan's face caused a cold shiver to run down Maya's spine.

"Of course I do not," she said. *"Sadly the relationship between our two people is not one based on trust. Thankfully it doesn't have to be today,"* she said and gestured to one of her officers who quickly attended his station.

The image on the view screen split in half to allow the face of a Xenarth not unlike Ket to appear next to the Romulan commander. *"Captain Donners, I have been able to monitor your conversation with Commander Toreth. I am Supreme Klestra of the Xenarth Aggregate and I can confirm to you everything that has been said. The Xenarth Colony is under the protection of the Romulan Star Empire. I expect you to fully acquiesce with our wishes and to surrender Queen Ket to us before you depart this system."*

"Klestra, you are making a grave mistake by trusting these Romulans," Ket spoke up before anyone else had the chance. "We don't know anything about them except that they only appear now after we have begun our recent experimentations with powerful technology"

The supreme considered the Artisan Queen for a moment. Maya couldn't be certain but she thought the look on her insectoid face was supposed to mirror disgust and disappointment. *"And you think this Federation is any different? Your obsession with their previous visit to New Xenarth is based on nothing more than the questionable stories left behind by your own kin. And even if those stories are to be believed, their interest in us has only ever been to destroy what we have created. The Romulans are offering us the greatness which is our birthright."*

Amaya stood from her chair before addressing the Xenarth leader. "That offer comes at a high price, Supreme. Are you certain you are willing to sell out your race into slavery for a chance at greatness that may never be allowed under your new leadership?"

"As I have told you, Supreme, the Federation is trying to use lies and intrigue to paint an unfavorable picture of our benevolence," said Toreth and then drilled her eyes into Donners'. *"Tell us, Captain, what do you plan to do*

with what the Xenarth have discovered? Can you honestly say that you will help them fulfill their potential the way we are able to?"

She hated to admit it but Toreth was good at what she did. She had maneuvered Maya into an untenable position. Revealing her orders to destroy the Omega molecule would only strengthen the supreme's dedication to stick it out with the Romulans. The alternative was to lie about her true purpose here and that would only backfire in the long run. She focused on the Xenarth instead. "You are inviting disaster by meddling with powers you do not fully comprehend, Supreme. And the Romulans will show no qualms to sacrifice you and your people to get their hands on that power. We can help you find another way that will guarantee the safety of your people as well as that of the entire quadrant," she said, knowing that she had lost the argument before it had even begun.

"Klestra, please listen to her. As difficult as it may be to believe and as hard as it may be to try and turn your back on something as powerful as Xendaru, it is not worth putting at risk the entire Colony over it," the Artisan Queen pleaded.

Predictably the supreme was not to be swayed. "I have made my decision and it will stand. Your title has been stripped and you are considered a traitor for your involvement with an enemy of the Colony," she said and focused her large compound eyes towards Donners. "Captain, my directive is unchanged. Surrender your prisoner to the Romulans and leave this system at once." And with that her imaged blinked out, leaving only Toreth on the screen.

"You've heard the lady," said the Romulan commander with all the smugness of a person knowing she had the upper hand. "I do not wish any conflict with the Federation but if you try to interfere any further with Xenarth affairs you will, by implication, be interfering with Romulan affairs and that I cannot tolerate. Your failure to comply in this regard could be interpreted as an act of war and surely that is an outcome neither of us favors."

Maya had the strong urge to sit down again but she forced herself not to show any more weakness in front of the Romulan commander.

"We will rendezvous with your vessel in six hours and twenty-two minutes and expect you to hand-over the fugitive Ket without incident. Then you will depart this system without further delay."

Toreth didn't cut the link and instead seemed to savor this moment of apparent triumph over the Starfleet officer.

Maya nodded sharply. "We'll be there. Agamemnon out."

The Romulan was once again replaced by the image of the imposingly large *Khazara* and Donners sat back in her chair, fully aware that every set of eyes on the bridge was now focused on her. None as concerned and perhaps anxious as those belonging to the former Xenarth Artisan Queen.

Agamemnon, 2372

The main science lab was empty except for Daystrom and Chen. While the captain had shared knowledge of the Omega molecule with her senior officers, she had made it perfectly clear that no one else in the crew would be privy to their true mission details and had sworn her officers to secrecy.

Whatever work needed to be done in order to accomplish this mission had to involve the least amount of personnel.

For the chief science officer and chief engineer that meant that they had to seal themselves into the lab and find a way to destroy the controversial sub-molecular particle by themselves. And the captain had given them a tight timetable to produce results.

"I do not understand why you doubt this method," said the Xindi as he considered the computer simulation running on the monitor. "It appears to have proven successful when breaking down the molecule in the past."

"According to our long-range scans the Xenarth are not using the same resonance containment chamber design as last time they tried to synthesize the molecule," the scientist said. "We will not be able to simply inverse the isofrequency to destabilize the particles."

"Then we construct our own resonance chamber and transfer the molecules inside to be destroyed."

But Daystrom had since turned away almost as if no longer interested in partaking in this conversation.

Chen's feelers twitched in confusion. "Lieutenant?"

"Listen to yourself, Commander," he said without turning back to face the chief engineer. "You are talking about wanton destruction. About tearing down ideas and new technologies which could be beneficial to billions of people." The young man turned around. "Shouldn't we be in the business of preserving those things? It just feels so wrong."

The insectoid engineer considered this for a moment. "My people used to build massive underground lairs by digging out many hundreds of meters into the soil," he said and getting a blank look from the scientist in response. "In fact many Xindi-Insectoid colonies still prefer to live underground in that manner. But sometimes those colonies become infected due to diseased roots or plant-life and the only choice is to fill in the colony and effectively destroying it before starting over somewhere else."

"I don't understand the relevancy."

"On some occasions you have to destroy in order to survive."

"But this is different," Daystrom said. "We're not allowed to start over anywhere. We're not even allowed to think or know about Omega. What if the Xindi leadership told your people that you cannot build underground colonies anymore because they are too dangerous even though thousands of Xindi prefer to live in exactly that manner?"

"You imply that the majority is always correct," he said. "Just because a great many people want something to be a certain way does not make it right, or safe. And yes, the Xindi leadership has deemed certain areas off-limit to underground colonies because of the inherent dangers to dig there. We have to accept that they know better than we do and that they make those decisions purely for the welfare of the many."

Daystrom clearly didn't care for that answer and stepped away from the chief engineer. "Right," he mumbled and then finally turned back to face Chen when he had reached the far bulkhead "And what if they don't know better? What then?"

Chen moved his large head from side-to-side in a motion designed to mirror a human headshake. "It occurs to me that this conversation is neither productive nor appropriate at this time, Lieutenant. Our orders are to come up with a plan to destroy the Omega molecule. As Starfleet officers we are not supposed to question our orders."

"That's not true," he said quickly, stepping closer. "Starfleet doesn't want mindless drones ..." he stopped himself and his face turned into an embarrassed grimace at using the term while addressing an insectoid.

"Not offensive," Chen clarified after sensing the man's discomfort.

"There is something called an unlawful order which should be disregarded. In fact it would be our duty to do so. It's in the regs," he quickly went on.

“And you are implying that Captain Donners and by implication Starfleet Command has given us an unlawful order? I suggest you seek out a JAG lawyer before making these kinds of accusations.”

Daystrom unsuccessfully tried to figure out if Chen had made a joke. It was difficult to tell with his non-humanoid facial gestures and body language.

Finally he uttered a heavy sigh, perhaps realizing that he would not be able to win this argument today. He stepped back up to the workstation and entered a few commands. “Building a resonance chamber from scratch would take too long. I suggest we simply disengage the power flow to the containment chambers without disturbing the containment field itself.”

The chief engineer considered the new simulation Daystrom had entered. “A simple yet elegant solution, Lieutenant. If we use the right modulation the particles would simply fizzle out and disengage, thereby neutralizing them quickly.”

“Lex parsimoniae,” said Daystrom in lackluster fashion and without affording his colleague with another glance.

“Indeed,” said Chen, understanding the human expression most often referred to as Occam’s razor for reasons he didn’t fully comprehend.

“Excuse me, Commander,” he said and then swiftly left his chair and headed for the doors and before the chief engineer could even inquire about his hasty departure.

Chen didn’t remain alone in the lab for long. His feelers straightened tellingly when the only other person outside the ship’s senior officers who had been given leave to enter the science lab stepped inside, leaving the security guard tasked to escort her by the doors outside.

“Queen Ket,” he said.

“Please,” she said quickly. “My title has been stripped by my people. Ket will suffice.”

The Xenarth and her unique blend of insectoid and humanoid characteristics were fascinating to the Xindi chief engineer who in his Starfleet career had often struggled to identify with his fellow officers. And while Ket shared many attributes with humanoids, she unquestionably saw herself first and foremost as an insectoid. The bond that they had created in the short time they had known each other went beyond the simple acknowledgement of their similarities. In fact their differences were still significant. Ket for example was a clearly female member of her species

while Xindi-Insectoids were asexual even if Chen had long since made the decision to identify himself as a male to simplify social interactions.

The most notable physical similarities between them, like their similarly shaped skulls, their compound eyes as well as their feelers and mandibles made Chen more adapt at reading Xenarth body language than anyone else on the crew.

And at the moment he could easily tell that she was in a despondent mood.

"I apologize for the delay," she said. "My briefing with Lieutenants Mer'iab and Sh'Fane took longer than expected."

"You have not missed much other than Lieutenant Daystrom's doubts over our current strategy."

"I have noticed the lieutenant leaving the lab," she said. "I am not able to easily read human expressions but if I am not mistaken, he did not appear pleased. Has no progress been made?"

Chen gestured towards the monitor to show her the last simulation they had been running. "On the contrary, we believe we have a solution which we can present to the captain."

She studied the screen shortly but not being a scientist or an engineer she quickly gave up understanding the details of this plan.

"Forgive me for saying so," said Chen. "It is you who appears dispirited."

She fixed those large dark compound eyes on him. "You find this surprising? My own people have marked me a traitor and demanded I be returned to them as a prisoner when all I ever wanted was to ensure that they do not destroy themselves by meddling in powers beyond our comprehension."

"Captain Donners has made it clear that she will grant you asylum if you request it. You mustn't fear being handed over to the Romulans."

"And yet I have an armed guard which shadows my every move on this ship as we continue to head towards a rendezvous with the very people who expect me to be transferred into their care," she said with her mandibles clicking anxiously.

"The guard is a routine precaution and follows you as much for your own safety as for the safety of the ship. We continue to head towards your world while the captain decides if to follow through with the destruction of the Omega particle. You should not be discouraged by these factors," he said.

Her mandibles constricted tightly and Chen figured that if they worked any way like his, then this gesture was an equivalent to a human smile.

"I am grateful for your words, Lieutenant Commander Chen. They are soothing and greatly appreciated."

"If you insist on me disregarding your title, I must ask that you extend me the same courtesy."

"Then so I shall," she said with her mandibles constricting a little further. "Chen."

While it was obvious that her spirits had been lifted slightly, her overall sadness was not easily dispelled. "I have faith in Captain Donners to resolve this matter with the Romulans and your people. She may be young for a starship captain and she may have limited experience but she is resourceful and has a good crew to provide her with sound advice."

"I do not doubt her wisdom," she said, her feelers twitching slightly. "Or that of her crew."

"If we are successful your people may be able to see their mistake in trying to pursue the Omega particle and casting you out."

"You don't know my people as I do. You don't know Supreme Klestra. She has waited a very long time to come to power and take over the Aggregate. Differently to her predecessors, she embraces technology but only for the purpose of pursuing the fanatical notion of reuniting the Colony with our deity and I fear she will stop at nothing to try and grow her influence. She considers those who are in her way expendable," she said and jerked her head slightly to the side before turning away and glancing towards the far bulkhead. "She will ensure I'll never set foot on New Xenarth and be surrounding by my own people again."

"There are other alternatives," he said. "You claim you have always held a fascination for the stars and the Federation in particular. Why not become an emissary of your people to the Federation? You can learn from us while you teach us about the Xenarth. And if you required a guide in your journeys, I would be glad to offer my services."

To that she turned back to face him. "You would leave your vessel?"

He took a step towards her. "I am an explorer. But some discoveries cannot be made on a starship."

"I believe I would enjoy that," she said and then leaned her head forward as if starting to nod.

Chen mirrored the gesture until their feelers touched. It was a sensation unlike anything Chen had ever experienced before.

* * *

She took a knee and placed a plate with large chunks of replicated raw meat onto the floor. Cosmo was ripping into his dinner the moment it was eye level, smartly using his large right claw to hold the food in place, and then tearing at it with his razor sharp teeth.

Maya watched the *le-matya* devour his meal and couldn't quite help but feel a tiny twinge of jealousy.

Cosmo had been with her for most of her life. Discovered as a cub on a seized Orion vessel by her parents while serving on the Border Service cutter *Thrasher*, they had given him to her as a present and companion in lieu of being able to make real friends as the daughter of two career service members. After all, for many years, she had called home various starbases and occasionally even the *Thrasher* or other vessels not designed for a civilian crew.

It hadn't been until she made chief engineer on the *Columbia* that she'd had accumulated sufficient clout to be able to keep Cosmo on her own assignments and even then it had not been an easy task to get permission from Starfleet bureaucrats to keep a wild animal as a pet.

The feelings of envy were new for her. But lately she couldn't help wonder what exactly Cosmo had to worry about in his life. What did he really do but eat, sleep and play? Right about now it seemed to her as if Cosmo had it made.

She petted his head which garnered her a quick, uninterested look before he went back to tearing up the fake meat. "You don't even know how good you have it, do you?" she said to him, even as he paid her no further attention.

"I'm sure he appreciates all that tender love and care you extend his way," said Texx who stood by her desk in her ready room, holding a padd. A large smirk on his lips. "*Le-matya's* are nowhere as cold and emotionless as their Vulcan planet-mates."

She stood and turned to face her first officer. "Judging by the tongue baths I've endured over the years I tend to agree."

Texx handed her the padd. "Mer'iab and Sh'Fane have come up with

a plan for a multi-pronged ground assault on Iota Crucis IVa and IVd using both Starfleet security personnel and Marines.”

“So quickly?” she said as she studied the padd.

The Bolian nodded. “And I’ve looked it over. It appears promising. They’ve used long range scans of the two moons to get an indication of the layout of the facilities and interviewed Ket for information about expected troop strength, weapons and abilities. Doctor Rass took extensive scans to better understand Xenarth anatomy. Sh’Fane and Mer’iab both believe that the results may help their assault strategy.”

“Honestly, I’m just impressed they managed to work on this together without killing each other first.”

“I’m more concerned about Daystrom to tell you the truth.”

Maya looked up from the padd and towards the sofa on which Vej had made himself comfortable. “He’ll be fine. I know he isn’t crazy about the idea of destroying Omega but he’s a Starfleet officer and when push comes to shove he’ll do his duty.”

“Don’t make the mistake to take that for granted,” the counselor said. “Right now he’s displaying all the classic signs of experiencing a serious internal conflict over what he thinks is right and what he has been asked to do. Starfleet officer or no, sometimes people decide to follow their conscience instead of their orders.”

The captain sighed. “What do you suggest I do? Sideline him for the rest of the mission?”

Texx shook his head. “If we are serious about going after this molecule we can’t afford not having his expertise. From what I understand he knows more about Omega than the rest of this crew put together.”

“I appreciate that,” Vej said. “All I’m saying is to keep an eye on the young man and not to push him too hard or too fast or you might invite a disaster when you least need it.”

“As if this isn’t one already,” said Maya and picked up a small white ball with red stitching which she had been told was used in a once popular sport on Earth. It had been a gift from Terrence Glover when she was on Deep Space Five, no doubt in trying to establish himself as an avid athlete in her eyes. Of course the gesture had changed nothing between them and she had little use for the obscure sport. Nevertheless she had liked how the ball felt in her hand and therefore kept it near her desk.

Her two advisors watched her curiously as she began to pace her ready room and throwing the baseball into the air, a bad habit she had

developed when pondering serious thoughts. A moment later, Cosmo, having completely devoured his dinner, prowled behind her, his eyes eagerly following that ball.

"Gentlemen, I'm not ashamed to say that I feel a little bit in over my head here. With the Romulans in the equation this has become even more of a powder keg situation which could quite easily lead us down a road to interstellar war if we don't tread carefully," she said and stopped to turn and face the two men. "If we carry out the Omega Directive to the letter we will not be able to avoid a battle. If we do nothing and tug in our tails and run away, the Romulans will get their hands on what may be the most powerful force in the galaxy, either changing the balance of power in the galaxy for good or leading to an arms race and quite possibly destroying half of subspace in the quadrant in the process."

Vej smirked. "Still enjoying sitting in the big chair?"

She fixed him with a scowl and the counselor wiped that smile off his face.

"We could hold our ground and wait for reinforcements to arrive," said Texx.

But Maya quickly dismissed the idea. "To what purpose? Besides if our reinforcements are moving in, I guarantee so are the Romulans'. Instead of two ships facing off we end up with two fleets. That's only going to complicate matters further," she said with a sigh. What she hadn't revealed yet were her own doubts about the Omega Directive itself. Maya had been truthful when she had told Ket earlier that it would be difficult for some Starfleet officers to carry out an order which so blatantly violated the Prime Directive even if it had been legitimized. What she hadn't mentioned was that she counted herself as one of those officers. The Prime Directive wasn't just some high concept or another Starfleet regulation to her. It had been indoctrinated into her so effectively that she found the idea of imposing her will onto an alien race which wanted nothing to do with the Federation nothing less than repulsive.

"It occurs to me that this is a matter of weighing the costs of our actions versus our inactions," said Vej. "A potential war and millions of deaths if we take action against the Romulans or an end to the galaxy as we know it we take no action and risk an Omega molecule accident," he added and looked first at Texx and then at the captain. "There are too many hypothetical scenarios and ethical quandaries in there for anyone to be expected to make well-founded decision."

“Not to mention the epic scope of either implication,” said the first officer.

“Gentlemen,” she said and placed the baseball onto her desk. “You are here to help me find solutions and not to remind me what a difficult decisions this is. Trust me I’m already well aware of that.”

“Sorry, Cap,” Texx said. “I suppose what I’m trying to say is that perhaps there isn’t a right decisions to be made here, just two inherently bad ones.”

“Agreed,” said the counselor. “You will have to decide which one is the lesser evil. And most importantly, which one you’ll be able to live with.”

“I think Cosmo wants to play fetch,” said Texx.

Maya turned around just to see the large cat having managed to put both his paws onto her desk to get to the ball sitting there.

“Hey!”

But Cosmo had already pushed the ball off the desk so that it bounced onto the floor and then quickly scooped it up in his large wet maw.

“That’s not yours, it’s mine,” she said angrily and then reached right into his mouth to dislodge the ball. Cosmo hissed in protest at first but eventually relented and the saliva-covered orb was set free again. She wiped it clean on her uniform pants with one hand and grabbed the large animal’s jaw with the other, pulling it up so his eyes were focus on hers. “We talked about this. You have your things and I have mine. You can’t have what’s mine.”

Texx and Vej exchanged an amused look at the captain’s interaction with her pet, both getting the distinct impression this was one of many similar ‘talks’ they’ve had.

Maya was unconcerned by her audience and kept hold of Cosmo. But her gaze had wandered off. “You can’t have what’s mine,” she quietly repeated to herself.

“Cap?” Texx said when he realized that she didn’t appear to be thinking about the *le-matya* anymore.

Cosmo finally managed to free himself from his mistress’s grip and trotted back to his favorite place below the window.

She turned to glance at the first officer with a little twinkle in her eye.

“I don’t think I like that look,” said Vej.

Khazara, 2372

The door chime to her quarters sounded to announce a visitor and she barked, "Enter," without ever taking her eyes off the padd she had been studying diligently.

Rekar stepped into Commander Toreth's spartan quarters and walked up to her desk. "You wished to see me," the Tal Shiar operative said, keeping the tone of his voice haughty as if coming here was a great imposition to him.

Toreth responded by holding up a finger towards him and without affording him a single glance as she kept her eyes on the padd. It was a gesture likely to rankle the man on purpose.

She left him stewing for nearly half a minute. Toreth had never much cared for the Tal Shiar, considering their methods of fear and intimidation counter-productive and their agents even more arrogant than most Romulan officials. Secretly she had hoped that after their decimation at the hand of the Dominion would change things within the empire. Instead what was left of the intelligence apparatus had tightened its grip on Romulan society even further, perhaps in fear that otherwise it might slip out of their grasp for good.

She finished reading the document and then, without warning, slung the padd at the man's chest who struggled catching the device for a moment as it nearly slipped through his fingers. "What is the meaning of this?" he seethed.

Toreth fixed the man with a glare of her own. "That's what I want you to tell me, Subcommander."

Rekar visibly suppressed the urge to further demonstrate this inappropriate behavior, fully understanding that no matter his own sense of importance, on the *Khazara*, Toreth was the ultimate authority. He glanced at the padd and after reading just a few lines, his eyes widened and he shot her a disbelieving glance. "How did you obtain this?"

Toreth stood. "Do not concern yourself with how I acquire my information, what matters is that I did. Now I want to know, is it true?"

The man needed a moment to compose himself. "You have not been authorized to –"

"Is it true, Subcommander?"

Rekar took a small breath and returned the padd back onto her desk before returning her accusatory stare in kind. "Do you really think we would be here if what the Xenarth had to offer was not immensely valuable to the Empire?"

"You call that valuable?" she said and snatched the padd up again, quickly scrolling down the many pages it contained. "According to this the entire Psi Velorum star system was made impassable by our own scientists' failed experiments with this molecule," she said and kept scrolling. "Three hundred civilians and soldiers were killed in a separate incident in the Borderlands. According to statements by every respected molecular scientist within the Empire, the inherent risks of trying to synthesize this particle far outweigh the possible benefits."

"I'm certain those are the same warnings leveled against the first people trying to utilize fire," he said smugly.

"You and Tomalak are willing to start a war over a substance which we may never be able to even control? Are you insane?"

Rekar's expression darkened significantly. "Commander, I'm willing to extend to you the respect that you deserve as the captain of this vessel and I will put up with your eccentricities up to a point. But you are dangerously close to crossing that line," he said, his voice cold as ice. "Be mindful that if you cross that line and you may never be able to step back into your place."

"You are my first officer"

"I am Tal Shiar," he said. "And you can be assured I will use all the resources and privileges my organization affords me to see this mission fulfilled."

"Does the senate know what we are doing here? How about the praetor?"

"You are a soldier, Commander. You mustn't concern yourself with politics. All that is required of you is to follow the orders you've been given by your superior officers. And those orders are to secure the particle at any cost before it can fall into enemy hands."

She waved the padd at him. "We both know that the Federation already knows about this and that they are not here to secure it for themselves. Captain Donners didn't come out and say it but it was obvious that their mission is to find a way to destroy it."

"We cannot allow this to happen."

"Even if it that means war with the Federation?"

Rekar smirked. "If it comes to war, it will be because of their doing. It will be Starfleet firing the first shot."

She considered those words for a moment. "You seem quite certain of this."

He nodded. "Why wouldn't I be? Don't forget, we are in the right here. The Xenarth have voluntarily asked for our protection and they have no intention of surrendering their most powerful weapon to the Federation. If *Agamemnon* doesn't back down, we are entirely within our rights to defend the good people of New Xenarth from foreign aggression."

She frowned. "And then what? We take the particle for ourselves and trust that our scientists won't blow up another star system by mistake?"

The Tal Shiar operative headed for the doors but stopped short to turn and face her once more. "Your problem, Commander, is that you worry too much about matters entirely outside your control. Follow your orders, protect the Xenarth and ensure the particle is safe. Leave all other considerations to the people better equipped to make those decisions," he said and then promptly stepped out.

"I haven't dismissed you, you bastard," she mumbled after the doors had closed behind him.

She glanced towards the single, forward facing viewport in her quarters. Somewhere out there a seemingly unavoidable confrontation was heading towards her and her vessel. Toreth had served with the Imperial Navy long enough as not to let an encounter with the enemy scare her anymore. She was confident in the superiority of the *Khazara* and the skills and abilities of the men and women who crewed her. If it came to a fight, she knew she could win.

But for the first time in her long career she wondered if victory was in the best interest of the empire. The galaxy even.

Agamemnon, 2372

She hadn't even been consciously aware that she was pacing the space in front of her chair until she caught the subtle frown on Vej's face. She froze in her tracks and mentally chided herself for displaying such blatant anxiety in front of her crew.

Maya turned to face Tess Allenby at the operations console. "Time to intercept, Lieutenant?"

"Just under five minutes, sir," the young officer responded promptly.

"Captain, I recommend that we raise shields and power weapons," said Mer'iab from tactical in a firm and confident tone.

"Why would we want to do that?" quipped Texx. "We're just here to make a drop off," he said with a smirk and when his eyes found Ket he promptly shot her an apologetic look.

The former Xenarth queen showed no outward signs of having been insulted.

The tactical officer however didn't appear to appreciate the levity shown by the Bolian first officer. "With all due respect, sir, the Romulans have already indicated that one perceived misstep could have severe consequences. We should be prepared for anything."

"What's the *Khazara's* status?" said Maya.

The Aurelian looked noticeably uncomfortable answering that question. He didn't even have to check his board. "Their shields are down and their weapons are offline. But I still believe—"

"Noted, Lieutenant," she said. "But you said it yourself. One misstep is all it takes. I'd rather not be the one triggering hostilities here today. Keep a close eye on that ship and advise of any changes immediately. If they raise shields, so do we. If they power their weapons, I want our phasers and launchers hot and ready to blow her apart."

"Yes, sir," he said, responding to the belligerent tone in her voice.

"They're hailing us," said Texx.

"Showtime," added Vej, shooting the captain a quick, reaffirming glance.

Maya nodded and took her seat. She crossed her legs by the knee and straightened her shoulders. She was determined to present a more collected and confident appearance this time around even if inside she felt anything but. Toreth had clearly owned their last meeting but this time Maya wanted to turn the tables on the Romulan and negotiate from a position of strength. She allowed herself one last little breath of air. "On screen."

"*Captain Donners,*" Toreth said without preamble as her image appeared on the main viewer. "*We stand ready to receive the prisoner.*"

Maya took her time to respond, deciding to give the other woman a thorough once over first, almost as if seeing her for the first time. "I'm afraid there has been a change of plans, Commander."

"*Is that so?*" she said, cocking an eyebrow in a manner that would have made a Vulcan proud.

"Queen Ket has requested political asylum on board my vessel. After hearing her case I am concerned that she may be subjugated to what we would consider harsh and inappropriate punishment resulting in serious bodily harm or even death. Leaving me with little choice but to grant her request."

"*And I suspect you would not be swayed even if I'd personally guarantee her safety.*"

"As we would have limited means to verify this, I will have to stick to my decision."

Toreth leaned forward in her chair. "*Captain, I find it curious that you decided to advise me of this new development only now. You could have contacted me at any time over the last few hours to tell me this.*"

"I've arrived at this decision only very recently," she lied. Toreth had already told her what she wanted to know without having to spell it out. The Romulan commander would make very little fuss over this decision even if it would anger their new allies that she had been unable to secure Ket to stand trial as a traitor. This meant that Toreth was most likely as eager to avoid a confrontation that could lead to interstellar war as she was. The thought greatly encouraged Maya.

"*You do realize of course that the Romulan Senate is likely to lodge a formal complaint over this to the Federation Council on the behalf of the Xenarth Aggregate,*" she said with very little bite in her tone.

Maya smirked. "It'll be a matter for politicians and diplomats to resolve."

The little nod she received in response gave proof that Toreth was about as weary of such figures as she was. "*Indeed,*" she said and remained silent for a moment as if to appreciate one of the few similarities she shared with her Starfleet counterpart. "*I expect you and your ship to turn around and leave this system immediately.*"

Maya forced herself to maintain her calm demeanor. "I won't be able to do that."

Toreth looked downright disappointed. "*Captain, we have been through this. The Xenarth are now under our protection and unwilling to stand for Federation interference. Are you telling me that you are willing to risk a war over this?*"

She quickly shook her head. "Of course not. And the Federation respects the wishes of any sovereign government even if those include alliances with foreign powers."

The Romulan woman's frown was born of genuine confusion. "*I'm not entirely sure that I follow your logic here, Captain. You appear to be contradicting yourself.*"

"Not at all," she said. "I'm fully committed to this. You may even advise the Xenarth leadership that we are more than happy to assist their relocation to a suitable world within the Romulan Star Empire if they do not have the capacities to do so themselves."

"*The Xenarth have no intention of relocating,*" she said sternly as her facial features hardened. "*This system is their home.*"

Maya did her best to take on a concerned look. "I'm afraid that is not the case," she said. "Our records clearly indicate that this system was entirely uninhabited just over one-hundred years ago which implies that the Xenarth arrived here at some later point. They settled on Iota Crucis IV, a Federation world, without our permission. By interstellar law we are within our right to request that the Xenarth immediately vacate this system. Particularly if they wish to align themselves with a foreign power."

Toreth considered the Starfleet captain for a moment, her expressions as stone-faced as that of a gargoyle. "*I appreciate that you may not have much experience in these matters, Captain, so I must ask you, are you certain this is the path you wish to pursue? I urge you to reconsider.*"

Now it was Maya's turn to look annoyed by the clearly condescending tone her counterpart had allowed to slip into her voice.

"Commander, my decision on this matter is guided by Federation and interstellar law and therefore I must stand by it."

Neither of them spoke for a moment as they appraised each other carefully in a manner which reminded Maya of a high-stakes poker game in which each player had thrown all their chips into the pot. She wasn't certain if she held the better hand just yet. Not until Toreth revealed hers.

"A shame, Captain," the Romulan commander finally said and then stabbed a control on her armrest, causing her face to blink out from the screen.

"Well played," said Texx. "You had her on the ropes."

But Maya was not sharing his first officer's enthusiasm. "Lieutenant, talk to me, what's the *Khazara* doing?"

"Her status is unchanged and ... strike that, they're powering weapons."

"Red alert, shields up," Texx barked.

Maya looked at the Bolian. "Not well enough, it would appear."

"Our position is legitimate," the counselor said. "You've taken away their moral high ground. If they open fire now, and consequently start a war, they will be seen as the aggressors."

But Maya shook her head slightly. "I don't think that will be much of a consolation to the casualties."

"Captain," Bobby DeSoto said urgently, "they are approaching in a standard attack run."

"Weapons range in twenty seconds," said Allenby, her fingers flying over her own console as she braced herself and the ship for imminent battle.

"We shouldn't allow them to get the upper hand and open fire first," said the tactical officer. "I recommend we attack before we are forced to play a defensive game."

The captain uncrossed her legs and grabbed her armrests tightly. "Transfer all available power to the shields, including everything we've got in our weapons."

Mer'iab didn't appear to understand or agree with this tactic which clearly went completely against his own recommendation. "Sir?"

"Do it, Lieutenant."

To his credit he didn't hesitate again. "Shields at one-hundred forty percent. The shield grid will not be able to absorb this amount of energy for long."

Texx leaned towards the captain on his left. "We blow the grid and we lose shields for good, Cap," he whispered.

She responded with a sharp nod.

"Romulans entering weapons range," Allenby said, her voice now unable to hide her anxiety any longer.

"They're opening fire," Mer'iab said.

Maya mentally cursed herself for her apparent miscalculation and held on tighter to her chair as she braced herself for the incoming volley.

It never came.

Instead every eye on the bridge watched the screen as the imposing warbird came within seemingly a hair's width of *Agamemnon* to perform a strafing attack but instead simply shot past them.

Arden Texx looked as confused as the rest of the bridge officers. He stood from his chair and turned to look towards Mer'iab. "Lieutenant, what just happened?"

Clearly the avian seemed slightly flustered himself as he double checked his instruments. "They ... they powered up their weapon emplacements and our sensors picked up massive energy spikes implying an imminent weapon's discharge. But they never actually fired."

Vej smirked. "It was a bluff, Lieutenant," he said and glanced at Donners. "And we didn't blink."

"They are preparing for another pass," DeSoto said.

Texx looked at the captain. "What are the chances they go for the same trick twice?"

"Zero to none," she said. "Lieutenant, redistribute shield power to weapons before we blow out that grid. Ensign, evasive pattern gamma-two. Stand by to return fire on my mark, target their weapons and engines."

Maya noted that her crew reacted instinctively to her orders.

"Captain, I have a new contact at two-four-six mark eight," Allenby said.

"More Romulans?" Texx asked.

"Where did they come from?" Vej said.

"Must have been cloaked," said Maya as her face twisted into a frown. Things had been bad enough with *Agamemnon* having to face off one warbird. She realized that their chances to survive this encounter battling two or more were miniscule at best.

“It is not a Romulan vessel, at least no design we’ve ever seen before,” Mer’iab said.

Texx clearly didn’t appreciate the surprisingly vague report. “So who is it, Lieutenant?”

For a second time that day the tactical officer appeared stumped. “I am not entirely certain,” he said, “computer identifying now.”

Tess Allenby seemed to have an answer sooner. “Sir, I recognize this design,” she said and swiveled around in her chair to face her superior officers, her eyes wide as saucers. “It’s the Borg.”

Lexington, 2267

In the transporter room, Wesley found his Zulu chief of security already waiting with two of his red-shirted officers. They both held type-II phaser pistols which they kept trained on the as yet empty transporter platform while awaiting the Xenarth representative to beam on board.

"Quite the friendly welcoming committee we've put together here," said Doctor Vincent who had joined the commodore and Alexei Kuznetsov.

"These creatures have already demonstrated their hostile attitude twice," Lieutenant Nealo Mtolo pointed out. "I'd rather be prepared for any other such displays."

"Armed guards is a wise precaution, Lieutenant," said Wesley. "But have your men holster their weapons until they may be needed. And let's try to refrain from calling them creatures."

"Yes, sir," said Mtolo and gestured to his men who quickly attached the phasers to their hips before standing at attention.

"Ensign," said the commodore, looking towards the officer manning the transporter console. "Do you have the coordinates?"

He nodded. "Just come through, sir."

Wesley faced the platform while his first officer and chief surgeon flanked him on either side.

"Do they really look like bugs?" said Doctor Vincent.

"Da. Imagine an ant, walking upright and with a particularly nasty disposition," said the Russian first officer.

"That be all of that, gentlemen," said Wesley. "These are our guests and we will treat them as such. Ensign, energize."

Vincent couldn't help but to start subconsciously scratching himself.

The beam effect lasted only a few seconds and promptly revealed a tall insectoid. As already expected she stood on two legs and was as much upright as an average human. Thanks to her long feelers protruding from the front of her face, she stood quite a little taller than anyone else in the

transporter room. Now that Wesley got to see a Xenarth up close, he realized that they were perhaps not so different after all. That was of course besides the clearly hardened exoskeleton, the antennae, the mandibles, the disturbingly large and round black eyes and the four arms.

He also thought he could see a few, what he believed to be, female characteristics. Her torso was slim and bulged out slightly around her hips. She had slender legs and appeared to wear hints of facial painting around those large eyes which could be considered make-up. She wore a form-fitting, simple green dress with golden, crescent-shaped markings across the chest.

"Welcome aboard the *Lexington*. I'm Commodore Robert Wesley. This is my first officer Commander Alexei Kuznetsov and ship's physician Doctor Charles Vincent."

But the Xenarth was paying little attention to the Starfleet officers and instead kept studying the transporter with great curiosity.

When Kuznetsov cleared his throat, she whipped her head towards the officers as if seeing them there for the first time. They didn't hold her interest for long. She looked passed them and towards the transporter console. When she stepped off the platform and towards it, Wesley quickly stepped aside to let her through.

Mtolo and his security detail tensed up noticeably, all three reaching for their phasers but Wesley raised his hand to let them know to hold their positions.

Their curious guest looked over the red and black console and the colorful control panel.

The ensign behind it had taken a step away but apparently couldn't help himself but stare wide-eyed at this alien creature as her head twitched back and forth. Then she stopped moving suddenly and looked up and right into the surprised ensign's face. "You appear startled. Is this because of my appearance?" she said, the universal translator now working perfectly to re-modulated and translate her language.

The ensign was completely stone-faced, apparently unable to speak.

Wesley stepped up. "I apologize for the behavior of my crew. We don't meet non-humanoid life-forms like yourself very often."

The Xenarth turned around to study the commodore, her head once again twitching back and forth slightly. "No apologies necessary."

“You are not Queen Quelphi, I presume,” said Wesley. In truth he wasn’t able to tell by her appearance but her mannerisms appeared very different to the Xenarth he had dealt with earlier.

She uttered a series of quick clicks which the UT was unable to decipher and Wesley interpreted as a laugh. Either that or a sign of great offense. He hoped it wasn’t the latter.

“All-Mother, no,” she said. “I feel I am the one who should offer apologies. I was so distracted and intrigued by your matter-conversion technology that I have failed to behave like a guest is expected to,” she said and lowered her head in a universal gesture of apology. “I am Artisan Queen Selphi and I most humbly ask your forgiveness.”

Wesley took a step forward and smiled. “Not necessary,” he said, repeating her earlier words. “First contact situations like these are fraught with misunderstandings and misconceptions as we try to learn each other’s mannerisms and behaviors,” he said. Making it quite obvious, at least to his fellow officers, that this wasn’t his first encounter with a new species he’d had in his illustrious Starfleet career. “I appreciate that going through our transporter can be disturbing when you experience it for the first time.”

Quelphi looked up and then passed him to look back at the platform. “It is a most curious machine. Tell me, does it allow you to move matter over any distance?”

If Wesley appeared surprised by the question, he did not show this. “It has a limited range. We can easily and safely transport persons and objects from a planet’s orbit to the surface. Just as we have you just now.”

The Artisan Queen appeared almost disappointed by this revelation. Of course Wesley couldn’t be entirely certain. It was too early to be able to fully interpret the Xenarth’s complex facial expression.

“Perhaps you would like to join us in our briefing room. We could continue our conversation there in greater comfort.”

“I would be delighted to,” she said.

Wesley nodded and pointed towards the doors. The Xenarth required only a couple of seconds to correctly interpret the gesture and then headed out of the transporter room.

“I think you can relax,” said Vincent in a hushed tone to Mtolo as he passed him by. “Looks like we beamed up the agreeable one.”

Of course the security chief showed no intentions of doing so and promptly followed Selphi and the senior officers.

The short trip to the briefing room unexpectedly took longer than usual. Most crewmembers stopped upon seeing the alien creature walking among them and did a poor job at avoiding staring at the insectoid outright. Thankfully the Xenarth didn't seem to mind and instead simply stared back. Overall she seemed more interested in *Lexington* and her technology than in her crew, leaving Wesley to think that she had a greater familiarity with humanoid life than he and his officers had with insectoids.

Once they had arrived at their destination, Wesley had the two security officers positioned outside while he, Kuznetsov, Vincent and Mtolo joined Selphi at the briefing room table.

As it turned out the Artisan Queen was not at all shy about speaking of herself and her people and quite curious to learn about *Lexington* and the Federation. Within moments the conversation was in full swing.

"You are saying that your Federation encompasses dozens of planets and different species? This is very interesting."

Wesley nodded. "We have only explored a very small percentage of our galaxy. And as you can tell we haven't come across very many species which are as different to us as you are."

"We have made similar discoveries," she said.

"Forgive me if I'm too forward," Vincent said. "But we have never heard of your species before and we know for a fact that this planet used to be uninhabited just a few years ago. Naturally this makes me wonder —"

"Where we come from?"

The doctor nodded.

"I suppose that is a valid question, considering that we have appeared within your territory uninvited."

"As I have tried to explain to Queen Quelphi. While you may have come here uninvited, you are certainly not unwelcome," Wesley said.

The Xenarth queen lowered her head again slightly before continuing. "Having a rational conversation with the Warrior Queen is a great challenge, I have to admit. If she'd had her way we wouldn't be speaking at all and you'd be fighting off our swarm ships instead."

"She is not your leader then?" Kuznetsov asked.

"No. However she wishes she were and the way things are progressing in the Aggregate, perhaps she will be soon. It is not a prospect I cherish and I fear what it may mean for the good of the Colony."

When neither of the Starfleet officers could think of a response, she continued. "I understand that you have offered to help us and it is solely

because of that reason that I have been allowed to come and meet with you. But before we continue any further it is imperative that you understand the complexities of the Xenarth Aggregate and the difficulties we face," she said, making an effort to look at each of the four men she was sharing the table with. "We have come here from a place we assume to be very far away. Please do not ask me where our now lost home world is located as I am not well-versed in such matters and I fear not even the Scholar Queen and her scientists would be able to explain it adequately. What I know for certain is that the stars in this place are very different to what they used to look like.

Driven by our ancient texts and promises, our entire Colony has been obsessed over the last one hundred sun-cycles to find Xendaru, the realm of our God-Queen. A new and powerful force we discovered not so long ago convinced our supreme, Queen Semunstra, that it would allow the entire Colony entry into Xendaru. In hindsight however Queen Quelphi remained right and it has only attracted elements which have nearly led to our total destruction. And as we stood at the very cusp of the downfall of our once great civilization, we placed all our trust into this powerful force, hoping against hope that it would take us to Xendaru and to our salvation."

The room was quite for a moment after Selphi had told the tale of her people as Wesley and his officers took in this tragic and yet fascinating story.

"So instead of reaching Xendaru you and your people landed here?" said Vincent.

"That is correct," she said. "But not everybody survived this journey. Millions of our sisters and brothers perished, including Supreme Semunstra."

"That would certainly explain how you and your Colony appeared out of seemingly nowhere. This force you speak of? It must be immensely powerful," said Kuznetsov and shot a quick glance towards Wesley at his side. Both men realizing that whatever Ketteract had discovered was clearly linked to the forces that had moved an entire civilization over presumably many hundreds of light-years of space.

"We have named it the Xendaru particle for the promises it was supposed to fulfill. And I have long since come to see it as a great curse on our people. Thousands of fellow colonists were killed in the sun-cycles wasted to attempt to create it and now millions more have been lost. Sadly

our leaders have not learned from those mistakes and our new supreme, the Cleric Queen Ergia, is determined to make use of this hellish force yet again to try and reach Xendaru once more."

"I take it from your earlier talk about complexities in your ruling faction that there is opposition to this plan," said Wesley.

She jerked her head in what could only be interpreted as a nod. "Yes. The Warrior Queen has made no secret of the fact that she is staunchly opposed to try for Xendaru once more. Sadly she lacks the subtleties for reason and negotiation while Ergia is far too obsessed with reaching the All-Mother to listen to anyone but her own best advice. I fear that the Aggregate will tear itself apart and the Colony along with it."

"I sympathize with your situation, Queen Selphi," Vincent said and then glanced towards Wesley. "But we usually don't involve ourselves in the affairs of other races."

The commodore considered this for a moment, fully aware that the doctor was right. If the framers of the Prime Directive ever had a situation in mind to which their rules needed to be applied to, than this was it.

"I certainly don't fault you for not wishing to become entangled in the power plays of my people," Selphi said before Wesley could render some form of verdict. "But I fear that if Ergia and Quelphi are not stopped, the next time the Xendaru particle is employed, the disaster that will follow will wipe out the entire Colony."

The doors to the briefing room swished open and loud voices interrupted the meeting.

Mtolo quickly jumped out of his seat and brought up his phaser, apparently expecting the worst.

"Sir, you can't go in there," one of the security officers insisted.

"Let me go, you red-shirted dimwit," Ketteract complained loudly. "You couldn't possibly fathom the seriousness of this situation. The entire galaxy is about to go up in flames and I may be the only person who can stop it."

Surprisingly the comparatively frail scientist managed to sidestep the much bigger security guard and slip passed him and into the briefing room. He froze when he noticed Mtolo's phaser pointed at him. Then he saw the Xenarth, now also standing with her feelers fully raised in alarm, before he managed to tear his wide-open eyes away to focus on a clearly annoyed Wesley.

"What is the meaning of this?" Kuznetsov barked.

Not a moment later Zha'Thara appeared by the open doors. She looked flustered and out of breath as if she had run all the way from the bridge. "I'm sorry, sir. I tried to stop him but he's faster than he looks."

"Doctor, I'm waiting for an explanation before I have Nealo here shoot you where you stand and then dragged to the brig from where you may enjoy the rest of this mission," the Bear said, clearly fuming over this entirely inappropriate display by the scientist.

But Ketteract ignored the Russian and the phaser pointed at his chest and instead took a step towards the commodore. "My findings leave no doubt. This Omega molecule will kill us all if we don't take immediate action."

This seemed to pique Queen Selphi's interest. "And you believe you can help us avoid a disaster?"

Ketteract looked at the Xenarth for a moment, now carefully considering his response. "Yes. I think so."

"Doctor Ketteract, after this meeting you and I will have a serious conversation about expected decorum on a starship," said Wesley sternly. "Until then, sit down and tell us what you've found. You too, Commander."

Ketteract and Zha'Thara took a seat and after a moment the security chief secured his weapon again and joined them.

"I apologize for this rather unexpected interruption, Queen Quelphi," said Wesley once he and the Xenarth were in their seat again as well. "As you may have deduced, Doctor Ketteract is not a regular member of my crew and still has to learn about the behavior I find acceptable on my ship," he said and shot the scientist a stern look even though he didn't appear to notice.

"Doctor Ketteract is the main reason we are here. He is the one who first discovered the energy readings from your Xendaru particle and pinpointed them to the planet you currently inhabit. Commander Zha'Thara is my science officer."

Quelphi looked at them both but seemed slightly more interested in the Andorian, studying her closely. "A pleasure to meet you both. And if I may say, I am rather fond of your antennae, Commander."

The science officer smirked at the unexpected compliment. "Yours are not that bad either, your ... majesty."

The title was properly incorrect but Quelphi didn't seem to mind and she moved her head from side to side which appeared to be a sign of appreciation.

"If I may ask, are all the leaders of your world female?" said Vincent.

"Only a female can become a queen," she said. "It has been this way for a great many generations and as long as anyone can remember."

Vincent nodded, now seemingly understanding why she seemed to take so well to Zha'Thara.

"Doctor, you were about to tell us about this ... Omega molecule, was it?" Wesley said.

"Yes," he said excitedly. "A fitting name for the substance which is going to bring an end to the universe as we know it."

If nothing else Ketteract was a master of hyperbole with a flair for the dramatic and he seemed to enjoy the reactions he had forced from his audience as he waited patiently for his words to sink in.

Wesley had no use for this. "Doctor, by all means, don't leave us all in suspense here and elaborate on your theory."

He nodded quickly. "From what I can tell, further to my detailed analysis of the substance I have located on Iota Crucis' surface, this molecule is even more powerful than I previously anticipated. I now believe that the shockwave we experienced earlier was nothing more than a tiny taste of what kind of forces would be unleashed if it became unstable."

"The shockwave you speak of was the result of an accident in our research facility which killed over six hundred of our workers and scholars. Sadly it has become a common occurrence," said the Artisan Queen.

"I think they tried to synthesize maybe a handful of molecules when this accident must have taken place. But from my scans the Xenarth have the ability to generate thousands of molecules. And another accident could easily trigger them all in a chain-reaction of unimaginable proportions."

"Let's try and be a little less vague, Doctor. Let's assume something like that would happen. What kind of damage would it do?" Wesley said.

The scientist didn't even have to think about that. "Total."

Wesley uttered a heavy sigh and then looked towards his science officer.

Zha'Thara cleared her throat. "Subspace damage on a quadrant-wide scale is not out of the question. I'm still having a hard time wrapping my

head around this Omega molecule and its potential. But I'm certain that subspace is particularly vulnerable to it."

"Subspace in this region is already damaged," said Kutznetsov. "We attributed this to the black hole at first but do you think it may be linked to this molecule?"

Ketteract jumped back in. "Yes, I do. Now imagine the same kind of damage not just across the sector but the entire quadrant and on a much more severe scale. Forget warp drive and subspace communications. This is a ticking time bomb we're dealing with here and once it goes off it'll throw the Federation back into the Stone Age."

Wesley looked at his science officer for confirmation and he got it when she nodded along slowly. "And you can prevent this?" he asked Ketteract.

"I have a theory on how it could be safely stabilized, yes. If I'm right and I think I am, the potential applications for this kind of power source would be endless. It would completely replace anti-matter engines on starships. Hell it may even replace starships all together. You could build portals so powerful, they'll beam you across the quadrant instantaneously."

At that Queen Selphi peaked up a little more. "The Star Portal."

Wesley and the others gave her puzzled expressions.

"The name of the device we have used to bring us here and powered by the Xendaru ... your Omega molecule," she said.

"Don't get me wrong, this all sounds quite horrific to an old country doctor like myself, but do we really want to take the chance to mess around with powers so clearly beyond our understanding?" said Vincent.

Except for Ketteract nobody in the room appeared to be perfectly comfortable with the idea.

It was Quelphi who spoke up first. "I don't see how we have much of a choice in the matter. The future of my people is at stake and from what you have said perhaps the future of yours as well. If you are willing to assist us, I will gladly recommend your services to the supreme."

"Of course. In fact I can come with you right now," said Ketteract, clearly excited about the opportunity to finally see with his own eyes that which he had only imagined previously.

Vincent shot the commodore a concerned look, one he understood perfectly. "Queen Quelphi, further to what we've learned today I agree with you that we stand much to lose if we don't take swift action. And yet I

am not entirely confident in making any rushed decisions on this subject. Perhaps it would be best if you relay to your leaders what has been discussed here and we will communicate further afterwards."

Selphi stood from her chair and everyone else quickly followed. "Commodore Wesley, I share your trepidations in this matter. I will do as you ask so that we can reach a solution which will be beneficial for the both of our people," she said and then looked at the other humans and the Andorian. "It was my pleasure to make the acquaintance of such fascinating creatures."

"The pleasure was ours," said Wesley. "I'm certain we will meet again soon. Lieutenant Mtolu, please escort our guest back to the transporter room."

The security chief nodded and led the Xenarth out of the room.

"Doctor, why don't you get back to the bridge and look over your readings again. I want to be absolutely certain that we know what we're dealing with here before we make any firm pledges of assistance," said Wesley.

Ketteract seemed offended by the suggestion that he could have made a mistake. "I'm confident in my assertions."

"I don't think that was a request, Doctor," said Kuztnesov sternly.

Ketteract huffed but ultimately left the briefing room.

"We could just let him go down there and see if he can talk them out of this whole Omega molecule business," said Vincent. "Ten minutes around that man and they'll do whatever he asks as long as we promise to take him back."

Even the Bear had to smirk at that.

"On a serious note," said Wesley. "I don't like where this is going. Putting the Prime Directive implications to one side for a moment, we're potentially talking about not only the complete annihilation of a race but a threat to the entire Federation."

"Are you suggestion that we don't give Ketteract a chance on stabilizing these molecules?" asked Zha'Thara.

"We can't just ignore this, that much is certain. But I need you to look into an alternative to Doctor Ketteract's plan. I don't think we can talk the Xenarth out of experimenting on this molecule."

"Which means we help them to stabilize it, avert a catastrophe on a galactic scale and watch them beam themselves hundreds of light-years away," said the first officer.

Vincent looked doubtful. "And if they cannot be stabilized?"
The commodore looked straight at his Andorian science officer.
"Then we have to find a way to destroy them. If the Xenarth like it or not."

Agamemnon, 2372

Her day couldn't possibly get any worse, thought Amaya Donners as she sat in her chair on the bridge, considering recent events. She had well known that becoming a starship captain would also bring with it a new set of challenges and responsibilities she'd never faced before. It felt naïve now to think that she had thought herself ready for them.

But then again how could she have ever imagined that within a week of assuming her new post she would be given one of Starfleet's most secret and seemingly controversial orders, hunting down and destroying a molecule whose existence she hadn't even been aware of until that point? How could she have known that this mission would lead her and her new ship into a direct confrontation with the Romulans who threatened her with interstellar war if she didn't back down? And how could she have possibly predicted that she would have to face the Federation's most dangerous and deadly enemy?

Maya's deliberations only lasted a couple of seconds, it was all the time she really had to spare during this unfolding crisis. Then she spotted Vej's eyes upon her once more but this time he neither frowned nor showed concern. Instead he gave her a reaffirming look, one that seemed to suggest that he had complete confidence in her ability to get the ship and crew through this in one piece.

She considered herself extremely lucky having the counselor at her side and without uttering a single word, she unlocked the determination she was sure she'd require to survive the next few minutes or so. The doubts and fears still remained but for now they were banned to the farthest reaches of her mind as she focused on what needed to be done.

The captain took in the image of the oddly shaped starship on the screen, bearing down on *Agamemnon*. She couldn't fault her tactical officer's confusion earlier. She didn't think she'd ever seen the asymmetrical designed vessel before either. The size was impressive, easily

twice as large as *Agamemnon* and the warbird put together, it had an almost vase shaped central core with two arms protruding outwards, a short horizontal one connecting to a rectangular section, while the second arm angled downwards and ending in a third section which looked like a smaller version of the central core.

"You are certain this is a Borg ship?" she said.

Allenby nodded firmly. "Absolutely, sir. I encountered a similar vessel while on the *Enterprise* two years ago."

"Confirmed. Starfleet has this vessel designated as a Borg Type 03," said Mer'iab, clearly flustered by the fact that he hadn't been able to bring up this information before. "The only previously encountered vessel was destroyed two years ago. At the time there was no indication that a second vessel exists."

"There is now," said Texx.

"Where did it come from? How come we didn't detect it sooner?" Maya wanted to know.

"When we encountered it on the *Enterprise*, the ship was able to utilize transwarp conduits just like other Borg vessels," said the operations officer.

Maya glanced towards Daystrom who quickly nodded in agreement. "I'm detecting residual readings of a massive triquantum wave close to the Borg ship's position. I should have seen it sooner."

"We had our hands full, Lieutenant," said Vej. "Besides with all the subspace disruptions around here it probably didn't stand out much."

The science officer didn't seem entirely convinced that the oversight was as forgivable as the counselor implied.

"Time to intercept?" said Donners.

"One minute, forty-six seconds," said Mer'iab.

"Looks like our Romulan friends have already changed course to greet the Borg," said Texx as he studied his console.

"We must have lost our appeal," said DeSoto.

"What's the tactical analysis?" the captain wanted to know. "What are the chances the *Khazara* can survive against that ship? What are ours?" she added and looked at the Aurelian at tactical.

Mer'iab shook his head. "Not good," he said. "Perhaps if we combined our assault but even then our chances are not favorable. The only way the *Enterprise* defeated this ship was by tricking it into the corona of a star and causing a solar flare."

“Not much of an option for us,” said Texx. “It’ll take use hours to get anywhere near the Iota Crucis sun.”

“Sir, I don’t think this ship is necessarily hostile,” said Allenby.

Maya shot the younger woman a puzzled expression. “Explain.”

The blond-haired operations officer took a breath. “This isn’t the Collective we’re up against but a rouge faction of liberated Borg. When the *Enterprise* encountered them they were led by an android with self-serving intentions but after he was neutralized a Borg by the name of Hugh took over.”

Vej looked perplexed. “The Borg have names now?”

She nodded. “This one had. Thanks to the *Enterprise* crew. As I said these are liberated Borg and last I checked they were on friendly terms with us. I cannot imagine that Hugh would want to fight us.”

“Let’s hope you’re right as otherwise this could be an extremely one-sided battle,” said Maya.

“Sir,” Mer’iab said. “The Romulans are engaging the Borg.”

The bridge crew immediately focused on the view screen where the massive Borg vessel and the comparatively diminutive warbird had opened fire on each other. The *Khazara* circled the much larger vessel as it unleashed one disruptor salvo after the other, seemingly trying to locate the enemy’s Achilles Heel. The counter-attack appeared much more devastating, judging by the way the warbird’s shields flared brightly with each hit. Some of the Borg weapons managed to penetrate and smashed into the hull with immense force and exposing atmosphere to the vacuum of space.

“Not going well for the Romulans,” said DeSoto.

“Mister Mer’iab, warn them off, tell them that they don’t stand a chance,” said Maya.

But the tactical officer quickly shook his head. “They are not listening, sir.”

“There’s a surprise,” said Texx.

“Sir, we’re being targeted,” Mer’iab shouted urgently.

Not a second later the powerful Borg weapons smashed into *Agamemnon*’s shields with such severity, it threw Vej right out of his chair. The other bridge officers barely managed to hold on.

“Direct hit,” said Mer’iab. “Shields down to seventy-eight percent.”

Maya jumped out of her seat and reached out for the counselor, easily pulling him back onto his feet. He aimed a grateful look at her.

But Maya was busy staring at Allenby. "You said they wouldn't attack us, Lieutenant."

She shook her head in perplexed fashion. "I don't understand," she said. "Maybe they think we are in league with the Romulans."

Maya turned towards tactical. "Open a channel to the Borg."

A quick nod confirmed it was done.

"Attention Borg vessel, this is Captain Donners of the Federation vessel *Agamemnon*. We have no hostile intentions against you. I say again, we are not your enemy."

Her response was another bone-rattling hit.

"Shields at sixty-two percent. Hull breaches on deck seven and eight," shouted the tactical officer over the red alert klaxons and the sounds of the ship almost tearing itself apart.

"Evasive pattern tango-four," Maya said and took her chair again. "Return fire, try to target the same areas the Romulans are shooting at, maybe that way we can punch through their shields."

DeSoto had the ship break-off sharply, avoiding another volley of incoming fire that had been meant for *Agamemnon*. Mer'iab quickly unleashed the various phaser arrays with near pinpoint accuracy, hitting the same spots the Romulan disruptors had attempted to break through just moments before. The results were discouraging.

"Multiple direct hits," said Texx but shook his head as he spoke. "Minimal damage."

"Captain," Wayne Daystrom said excitedly. "I'm reading another transwarp conduit opening."

Maya mentally chided herself for her earlier presumptuousness that this day couldn't possibly get any worse, realizing belatedly that she had jinxed herself in the process.

"Bobby, stand by to disengage," she said quickly, fully aware that if a second Borg vessel would join the fray, *Agamemnon* wouldn't last seconds.

"Wait a minute," said Daystrom. "It's not the Borg," he said and then turned to look at the captain with a growing smirk. "It's one of ours, sir. The *Cuffe*."

Maya glanced back towards the screen to see the *Nebula*-class starship emerge out of seemingly nowhere and then immediately bear down on the massive Borg vessel with a barrage of phaser fire and photon torpedoes. She couldn't help herself but smile at the sight. Leave it to Terrence Glover to brazenly introduce himself in dramatic fashion.

"They are hailing us," said Mer'iab.

"On screen."

Captain Glover's lopsided grin gave proof that he enjoyed the role of shining knight coming to rescue the damsel in distress. The dark-skinned, broad-shouldered starship captain had known Maya for over four years and ever since she had become his father's adjutant at Deep Space Five. And barely a visit had gone by that the younger Glover had not tried to flirt with her one way or the other. It came as little surprise to her then that he quickly found a way to make levity of the situation. *"First day on the job and you're already taking on the Romulans and the Borg?"* he said. *"What are you planning for tomorrow? Going a few rounds with Q?"*

"I like a challenge," she shot back despite herself. She was fully aware that *Cuffe's* timely appearance didn't mean they were out of the woods just yet.

"Lucky for you we were in the neighborhood. Came across this misshapen Borg monstrosity a few light years from here and followed it when it disappeared into a transwarp conduit," he said even as he had to hang on to the armrests of his seat as his ship was being pummeled. *"Keep firing, all weapons. Hit that thing where it hurts,"* he instructed his crew before he glanced back towards Donners. *"Follow my lead, Maya and we'll make the Borg curse the day they thought they could take on Starfleet's finest. Glover out."*

And with that he blinked out.

"Follow his lead?" said Texx and glanced at the captain. "I thought we were here first."

"Glover likes to take charge. It's in his psychological profile," said the counselor.

As grateful as she was for *Cuffe's* unexpected appearance, she couldn't deny that it annoyed her that her fellow captain had simply decided to take the lead and expected her to quietly fall in line. Of course she had expected nothing less from the notoriously audacious starship captain and quite frankly there was neither the time nor the opportunity to come up with an alternative.

"Cuffe is engaging attack pattern kappa-six," said the tactical officer.

"That's pretty aggressive," the first officer pointed out.

Maya nodded in agreement. Glover had decided to throw everything he had at the Borg, going in close and personal and sacrificing his defense for a loud and devastating offense. It wasn't her favorite strategy and it

was usually reserved for those rare times when an all-or-nothing approach was required. Glover clearly felt the situation was desperate enough.

"Match her attack pattern but I want all auxiliary power transferred to shields and hull integrity," she said.

Moments later both starships blasted away at the Borg vessel with everything they had, phasers firing at a near constant rate, interspersed with photon and quantum torpedo volleys.

And it still wasn't enough.

The science console exploded in a spark of flames, slinging both Daystrom and Ket to the floor.

Vej was up in an instant checking on the young science officer first and thankfully finding him mostly in one piece except for a few bloody scrapes covering his hands and face. Together they quickly tended to the Xenarth who had apparently taken the brunt of the explosion.

The two men helped her onto her feet but it was quickly apparent that she could not stand on her own.

"Crewman, take her to sickbay," Vej said to a nearby security guard who took over bracing Ket without delay, helping her to the turbolift. When the counselor turned towards Daystrom, the science officer quickly waved him off. "I'm alright," he said. "Just a few scratches," he added and then headed for an auxiliary station to repurpose it to replace the damaged science station.

"Shields at twenty-eight percent. We have hull breaches on decks three, six, nine and twelve. Casualty reports are coming in from all over the ship," said Mer'iab.

Maya glanced at the first officer who seemed to understand what she was after straight away. The usually sanguine Bolian looked discouraged. "The Borg vessel's shields are still at over fifty percent in strength and hull damage is minimal. *Cuffe's* shields are fluctuating."

"This is madness," said Vej who had found his chair again after helping the injured Ket off the bridge. "We're not going to survive this."

Mer'iab seemed to disagree. "At this rate I estimate that we will be able to overwhelm the Borg vessel's defenses within the next twenty to thirty minutes."

"Yes but at what cost?" the counselor said.

Maya left her seat to make her way next to Allenby at operations. She had to hang on tightly to her chair to avoid being thrown around the

bridge like a rag doll. "Tess, tell me about this Hugh. Why would he be trying to destroy us if he was an ally of the *Enterprise*?"

Allenby looked up at her captain by her side. "I'm not sure but this strikes me as very odd. Granted, I was not as involved with what was happening at the time but the rumors on the ship were that some of the senior officers had become friends with him and I know that he was instrumental in helping the crew rescue the captain from the rogue Borg who had been manipulated by the android. Afterwards he became their leader."

Another hit disintegrated part of the adjacent helmstation.

"I'm alright, I'm alright," said DeSoto quickly as he grabbed a handheld fire extinguisher he kept underneath the console and efficiently put out the flames which had already rendered part of his console unusable.

Maya focused back on Allenby. "You think he'd listen to reason?"

"I ... I don't know," she said, sounding a lot less sure of herself now.

The captain placed a hand on her shoulder. "Tess, you're one of the senior officers now," she said. "I need you to be confident."

The woman responded with a firm nod. "I think we have to try," she said more resolutely.

Maya nodded and headed back for her chair. "Put me through to the *Cuffe*," she said before sitting back down.

Terrence Glover appeared on the screen. The man had lost some of his earlier swagger and there were noticeable sweat pearls trickling down his forehead. A few blackened and soot covered stations behind him were evidence of a recent fire on his bridge. "*Not a good time*," he said even as he continued to bark orders at his crew.

"This isn't working, Captain. I suggest we disengage and try something else. I have cause to believe that we may be able to reason with the Borg."

Glover actually stopped what he was doing for a moment to shoot Donners the kind of look usually reserved for misbehaving children or mad people. "*I appreciate you haven't been in that chair for very long but even you have to realize how insane that sounds.*"

Maya frowned. "These are not your garden-variety, one-minded Borg drones we are dealing with. They are individuals and behave as such. Let me try to talk to them."

"They don't seem to be in a talking mood, besides we are winning this battle."

"I don't know about you but I'd like to have a ship left afterwards," she countered. It became quickly obvious that Glover had no intention of letting himself be swayed by somebody who had been a starship captain for less than a week. "We both pull back in a sign of good faith and I try to appeal to their individuality. What's the harm? If it doesn't work we come back with guns blazing in a final, glorious hurrah."

The grimace on the other captain's face spoke volumes. He didn't care for the plan in the least. *"You've got sixty seconds,"* he said sharply. *"Then we'll finish this. One way or the other."* And then he cut the transmission.

"Cuffe is disengaging," said Mer'iab.

"Even if we don't win this," said Vej, "you just managed to single-handedly change Terrence Glover's mind. That's a victory all in itself."

"I attribute it to my feminine charm and magnetic personality," she said with a grin before quickly adopting a more serious expression. *"Ensign, follow their lead and back us off from the Borg. Lieutenant, cease fire."*

And just like that both Starfleet ships turned tail and ran. At least for now.

"Commander Toreth must have listened in," said Texx, monitoring his console. *"The Khazara is also breaking off."*

"They know they don't stand a chance by themselves," said Mer'iab.

"Open another channel to the Borg vessel," said Maya.

"Channel open."

Maya took a deep breath and stood. *"This is Captain Donners on board the Agamemnon calling the Borg vessel. I am requesting to speak to the individual named Hugh,"* she said and then glanced at the Aurelian tactical officer who shook his head in response.

Texx turned his computer console so that the captain could see that the Borg vessel was now on a pursuit course and would be back within weapons range in a matter of moments. Maya quickly understood that she had far less time than the sixty seconds Captain Glover had given her.

"Hugh, we know that you are on that vessel and quite frankly I'm at a loss why you are attacking us. From my understanding you were friends with the Enterprise crew who spoke very highly of you."

The only response remained silence. On the screen the imposing vessel continued to bear down on *Agamemnon* and *Cuffe*.

"All I'm asking," Maya continued, "is that we open a dialogue. Let us discuss the matters that have made you betray your friendships and open fire on us. As an individual you have that option. You do not have to follow the same path of death and destruction as the Collective does."

The pale face that appeared on the view screen was unmistakably Borg. A large ocular implant covered most of the seemingly young man's face and a number of black tubes protruded from parts of his cranium. His remaining natural eye considered Amaya Donners coolly.

"*I have not betrayed my friendships,*" he said in a heavily modulated voice.

Maya had never faced the Borg before but she had heard plenty of stories. She had very shortly served on the *Bellerophon* but had transferred off that ship mere weeks before it was completely destroyed by the Borg in the battle at Wolf 359. She was still haunted by occasional nightmares involving the crew she had left behind which Vej had attributed to survivor's guilt. She felt a cold shudder shooting up her spine as she felt the Borg's meticulous gaze upon her now.

"I am not sure they would agree once they learn of your actions here today," she said.

He seemed to genuinely consider this for a moment and finally nodded. "*I shall allow you and the other vessels to depart this system peacefully. If you do so I will promise no further harm shall come to you.*"

"I cannot do that."

Hugh's cold look returned. "*And I cannot allow for you to interfere with my mission. It is far too important to allow friendships to keep me from what I must accomplish here. No matter how much I value them.*"

"Here's my suggestion. Come on board my ship and let us sit down together and discuss this mission of yours. Perhaps we can find a solution which will be agreeable to all parties," she said.

"*I cannot see what could be accomplished by such a gesture.*"

"For one it may avoid bloodshed. Our mission is as important to us as yours appears to be to you. And the Romulans have made it clear that they will defend this system no matter the cost," she said, her voice firm and steady. "The alternative is we all go back to shooting at each other until whoever is left standing will be far too damaged to have any chance

at completing their objective here. How about we give my idea a chance first?"

Hugh looked off-screen for a moment and while Maya couldn't be entirely sure, she thought he was communicating with somebody unseen for a moment. Then he looked back at her. *"For a long time I cursed Geordie, Data and the others on the Enterprise for what they did to me,"* he said and Amaya noticeably tensed. *"But the truth is that I would not wish to rejoin the Collective and give up my individuality for anything. My people and I remain in their debt which we will never be able to fully repay. I will grant your request and join you onboard your vessel,"* he said just before he closed the channel.

"Did we just invite the Borg over for dinner?" said DeSoto, not quite able to turn that frown into a smile.

Tess Allenby aimed a disapproving look at Bobby. "Not just any Borg," she said and then swiveled her chair to face the captain. "Hugh can be reasoned with," she added. "We just might be able to get out of this without having to go back into battle, sir."

"I appreciate your optimism, Lieutenant," she said, clearly not completely sharing Allenby's outlook. "But we're about to negotiate with the Borg and the Romulans over the most powerful force known in existence and without so much as a single diplomat to back us up. We'll need more than a miracle to come out of this without providing the lynchpin for an incident of galactic proportions."

New Xenarth (Iota Crucis IV), 2372

“Apogee is reporting fully operational and ready to begin synthesizing Xendaru. Secondary site on Zenith will be ready within twenty *lirkiks*,” said Liphra, the reigning Worker Queen of the Xenarth Aggregate as she considered a read-out from one of the many computer displays in the central command room.

Supreme Klestra communicated her agreement by jerking her oblong head to the side. “Ensure all the required boronite will be available at both sites, I do not want any further delays. What is the status of the Star Portals?”

“The portal on Apogee is complete. The secondary site is undergoing final testing and fine-tuning now,” Liphra said.

“Well done,” said the supreme and then turned to consider everyone in the control room. “Well done, all. To think that we achieved so much in such little time is a testament to the unbreakable will and dedication of the Colony.”

“It’s a sign of the God-Mother,” said Cleric Queen Nadelphi. “She has imbued us with a faith that shall overcome all obstacles, even our own short-sightedness of abandoning the pursuit of Xendaru for too long. She still awaits her children with baited breath and eager anticipation.”

Klestra considered the Cleric Queen for a moment, focusing her large compound eyes on the fellow insectoid. “And soon we shall be forever reunited.”

Nadelphi appeared too preoccupied with her own visions of basking in the glory of the All-Mother that she did not seem to notice the hesitation on Klestra’s part.

“There may be a complication to our plan.”

The supreme turned to find the Warrior Queen enter the room at a brisk pace. The imposing leader of the Xenarth military was at least a full

head taller than any other Xenarth assembled. And even here, at the center of their power and influence, she wore her dark body armor which only added to her already naturally toughened exoskeleton.

“You bring news of our new allies?”

“I fear the situation has become more complicated. Another vessel has now appeared in the system,” she said, waving a computer slate in one of her hands.

“Another vessel? More Federation ships?” asked Klestra.

“Much worse,” the Warrior Queen said and passed the slate to the supreme.

The leader of the Aggregate took the device and looked over its content. Before long her own agitation over the news was blatantly obvious by the way her feelers stood fully extended, pointing at the ceiling above. “It cannot be,” she said and raised her head to look at the leader of her military. “How certain are you about this?”

“We have no definitive confirmation but the comm. chatter we have picked up suggested that they are the Borg.”

The utterance of that name was enough drive the Xenarth assembled in the room into a frenzy of nervous clicks and agitated mumblings. The Borg were synonymous with the greatest evil the Colony had ever faced. If Xendaru and the All-Mother were tantamount to Xenarth salvation than the Borg were the bringer of death, doom and destruction. The destroyers of Xenarth Prime had returned.

“Calm yourselves,” the Cleric Queen implored her fellow sisters and brothers. “Calm yourselves. The All-Mother will provide. We stand but at the brink of eternal salvation. This is merely another challenge to overcome on our path to deliverance. Another test of our faith and dedication to the God-Queen.”

“We must immediately accelerate our work on the portals,” said Queen Liphra. “Ensure that they are ready to engage as soon as possible to transphase the Colony to Xendaru.”

There was immediate agreement with the Worker Queen, especially from Nadelphi.

But the supreme did not miss the fact that the Warrior Queen did not appear as convinced. “Samma, what are your thoughts?”

She glanced at the supreme perhaps surprised to be asked her opinion. The warrior caste had long since lost its influence it had once enjoyed over the Aggregate for generations. Ever since it had been her

people which had steered the Colony away from modern technology and the heralded Xendaru particle and its power to reunite them with the God-Queen which in turn had led to a century long dark age.

“Perhaps it is time to consider a new strategy,” she said carefully.

The Cleric Queen was not pleased with this view and immediately communicated this with a series and clicks and whistles which were meant to show her disagreement. “Our strategy is sound and ordained by the All-Mother herself.”

But Klestra was curious now. “Continue, Samma,” she said, paying little attention to the clearly flustered Cleric Queen.

“Consider this,” she said with newfound confidence in her tone. “We have pursued this exact same strategy before. We tried to rush our journey into Xendaru because we were afraid of these invaders laying waste to the Colony and instead of joining the God-Queen, millions perished and we found ourselves at the other end of the galaxy.”

“But what is the alternative?” asked the Worker Queen. “We are now beset on all sides by enemies, including those who’d like to pretend that they are our friends.”

“Yes,” Samma said quickly. “And they all want one thing.”

“The Xendaru particle,” said the supreme.

The Warrior Queen jerked her head in agreement. “They understand its awesome power and they fear it like nothing else in the galaxy. Let us give them reason to,” she said and balled her four hands into fists. “Let us use it against them and remake the Colony into the power it once was. Let us rise out of the darkness and take what is ours by birthright. The Xenarth are meant to rule the galaxy, not run away and hide at the first sign of danger,” she proclaimed with a passion which had the room spellbound to her every word.

Even the Cleric Queen seemed to warm to this new line of thinking. “Is this ... possible?” she said and then looked from Samma to the supreme.

“Using Xendaru as a weapon? With a few modification, it may be done,” said the Scholar Queen who was perhaps the most knowledgeable individual on New Xenarth when it came to the Xendaru particle after pursuing research into the powerful molecule for nearly a lifetime. First in secret, studying tirelessly the old texts of her predecessors and later successfully leading a revolution against the seemingly shortsighted Aggregate who had long since forbidden such technology. Upon claiming

the title of supreme, Klestra had wasted little time to throw every last resource the Colony had to offer into resurrecting the long dormant Xendaru project.

“The All-Mother would be greatly pleased if her children reclaimed domination over this plane before we rejoined her in the next,” said the Cleric Queen.

As was the nature of the Worker Queen, Liphra was more concerned with the practicalities of this bold new plan. “But do we have the time? The enemy is at our doorstep.”

“They will, no doubt, be preoccupied with each other for a while,” said Samma.

Kelstra jerked her head. “Then we must not waste this opportunity. I shall head to Apogee myself and ensure the modifications are completed as necessary.”

“Is that wise, Supreme,” said Liphra. “The greater your proximity to the Xendaru generators, the greater the danger.”

Klestra dismissed the warning. “Nobody understands Xendaru better than I,” she said with determination. “I shall personally ensure the portal is turned into a weapon of no equal which shall turn all who stand against us into dust.”

The Worker Queen lowered her head in agreement and submission.

“And so it will be done,” said the Warrior Queen.

Nadelphi raised her four arms into the air. “The All-Mother shall provide for us all.”

Agamemnon, 2372

“Permission to come aboard.”

Amaya Donners rolled her eyes when Terrence Glover stepped off the transporter platform before she had even had a chance to respond to his request. It was a mostly outdated naval tradition which barely anyone took seriously any longer but the barrel-chested starship captain didn't even pretend to care. She had no idea why it annoyed her, after all she had gotten quite used to Glover's ways while she had served as his father's adjutant and first officer.

“Granted,” she said quickly but of course by then he already stood in front of her.

“I have to give it you, Maya, you don't exactly believe in taking things easy, do you? Most shakedown cruises don't involve starting an intergalactic incident,” he said with a big smile, revealing a row of brilliantly white teeth which stood in stark contrast to his dark skin.

“This mission wasn't my idea,” she said, sounding more defensive than she would have liked.

“Of course not. We go where we're told,” he said. “And from the looks of it you may have managed to defuse this situation by talking the Borg and the Romulans into a meeting. That was an interesting approach.”

She smirked at that. “You mean talking instead of shooting? That a new concept to you, Captain?”

Glover pretended to look hurt. “Ouch. Is that the kind of thing they say about me behind my back?”

“You don't want to know what they say behind your back,” she said and pointed at the doors.

“And I couldn't care less either,” he said and stepped out of the transporter room.

Within moments the two starship captains were walking down the corridor side-by-side. “Commander Toreth and Hugh have been in the

observation lounge for ten minutes. I'm not entirely comfortable with letting them wait so long," she said.

"Trust me, it'll soften them up a little to be kept waiting."

"Or it could make them more belligerent," Maya said. Glover had suggested the tactic of keeping her guests waiting for the meeting to start as she had found herself taking cues from the more senior officer even if she didn't entirely agree with them.

They stepped into the turbolift. "Deck two," said Donners.

"Our first priority will be to get the Borg to back down. I've reviewed the *Enterprise* logs regarding this Hugh character and I think you were right in appealing to his common sense. He just might see reason once more and agree that pursuing whatever crazy mission he's on is only going to get him and a whole lot of others killed. The Romulans are going to be tougher," he said and glanced at a data padd he had brought with him. "I like what you did when you put your foot down in regards to Iota Crucis. And you were absolutely correct, it's our system and we're not giving it up because some civilization has decided to make it their new home. Toreth may have been willing to take on *Agamemnon* over this but I'm sure she'll think twice now that *Cuffe* is here as well."

The doors to the turbolift opened and Maya showed Glover to the observation lounge's entrance beyond which the Borg and Romulans had gathered. They stopped short of entering.

"Lastly of course we have to deal with this Omega molecule and something tells me we don't have the time for the *Volta* and her fancy scientists to get here and take care of this for us. So we'll need to take the initiative, track down any traces of this thing and wipe them out. According to my science officer we may be able to achieve this by —"

"Hang on," said Maya who wouldn't have been able to get in a word edgewise if she had let him carry on. "You briefed your crew about Omega?"

Glover shot her a perplexed look. "Of course. Some orders are just too stupid to follow, even if they come from the old man," he said with a grin. "Don't tell me you managed to keep it a secret."

Maya was visibly relieved at the other captain's admission. The thought that he had also disregarded the Omega Directive, at least the part of not sharing any knowledge with his crew, came as a huge weight being lifted off her shoulders "Let's just say I'll be standing right next to you at that court martial."

"It won't come to that, trust me. End of the day we're out here having to make difficult decisions. It's us and nobody else. Not my dad and certainly not the brass at Starfleet Command."

Maya nodded along slowly, recalling her earlier conversation with Vej on the same subject. She suppressed a smirk when she remembered the counselor mentioning that Glover had sought him out for advice in the past as well. After all those words sounded quite familiar to her.

"Tell you what, we'll figure out how to deal with Omega after we've dealt with the Romulans and the Borg. I think we've left them smoldering in there just about long enough," said Glover and turned towards the doors.

"Captain," she said before he could slip into the observation lounge.

He turned and sighed heavily. "You really need to start calling me Terrence. I've put up with this captain business for the last two years because I outranked you. No more excuses."

She nodded her assent. "I'd like to head the talks if you don't mind."

The look on the other captain's face made it clear that he did.

"It's was my idea," she said. "And it's my ship."

"I have more experience here, Maya and I'm the more senior officer. It really should be me."

She took a step closer to him. "No offense but if it had been up to you we wouldn't even be having this meeting right now. And about experience, I've spent the last four years getting people to change their minds on a regular basis as your father's adjutant. I think I can handle this."

He still didn't look convinced but Maya could tell that he wished to avoid pushing the issue. She couldn't blame him for that, the last thing they needed was to start fighting over who should be in charge. Starfleet regulations were not as clear on the subject as she would have liked. *Agamemnon* was arguably the tactically superior vessel and therefore overall command of any joint operations should have fallen to her but with only having been in the big chair for less than a week, Starfleet Command would have undoubtedly backed Glover in this situation.

Judging by the hard expression on his face, he was convinced that he was the right man for the job.

"Just give me a chance to talk them down," she said. "One shot, that's all I'm asking for, *Terrence*."

His facial features softened. "I see what you're doing."

She shrugged her shoulders innocently. "Your idea," she said with a smirk.

"Yeah and if I had known you'd use it against me I would've thought twice about letting you go to first-name basis," he said. "Fine, you take the lead for now," he added and pointed at the doors.

Maya aimed a wide grin at the man. Sometimes all you needed to defuse a tense situation was a little bit of charm, she thought. Donners quickly wiped that smile off her face as she stepped through the doors, fully cognizant that it would take much more than that to get the Romulans and the Borg from starting a war.

The male Romulan officer who had accompanied Commander Toreth onto *Agamemnon* was out of his chair the moment Maya had stepped foot into the briefing room.

"This is outrageous," he said immediately. "You've been keeping us waiting here on purpose. This is entirely unacceptable."

"My apologies, Subcommander...?"

"Rekar," he hissed. "And I do not accept your apology."

But Donners turned to look at Toreth instead who had remained in a semi-relaxed posture in her chair with a lopsided grin on her lips.

"You must forgive Mister Rekar. Tal Shiar agents are infamous for their impatience. You'd think an intelligence officer be able to show more restraint."

Rekar shot a vile look at his superior, communicating his displeasure at being denounced by one of his own, before he quietly took his seat again.

By the time Maya took her seat at the end of the table she thought she had already figured out the Romulan's game plan. Toreth had used her own man to voice her displeasure for being kept waiting but then sacrificed him openly to show her determination not to take any prisoners. And if that was true for her own people, this was devastating news for her enemies. Maya couldn't help but admire the bold gambit. But she also thought that the tone of her voice had been a little sharper than it had to be, possibly hinting towards the fact that she wasn't in fact particularly fond of Rekar.

Maya gave the woman a sharp nod in acknowledgment and then glanced towards her left where the two Borg sat. It took some serious willpower on her part not to be visibly discomfited by sitting at a table with the two cyborgs whose race had been responsible for the deaths of so

many of her fellow Starfleet officer and countless more civilians. She had to make an effort to remind herself that these were individuals now and no longer connected to the Borg Collective.

Hugh appraised her coldly. "It occurs to me, Captain, that you are merely attempting to avoid the inevitable by delaying these very talks on which you have insisted. I assure you that my patience is quite extensive considering the great reward which my mission offers me and my people."

The same however could apparently not been said for the former drone sitting to Hugh's left. The man looked impossibly younger than the Borg leader himself and he seemed to almost fidget in his seat as if he had never been in a chair before. And while Maya figured that that was completely plausible, she had a feeling that his agitation was not solely due to the unfamiliar furniture.

She shot a quick glance towards the two doors leading out of the observation room she found guarded by a set of a security officer and one Marine each. It had been Texx's idea to mix up protection assignments and to prove to their reluctant department heads that if their men could work together there was no reason that they couldn't.

Under normal circumstances Maya wasn't a great proponent of armed guards but right at this moment their determined faces and ready weapons actually put her at ease.

She let her gaze wander across the table and made eye contact with their other guest, Queen Ket, who she'd asked to attend. She had fully recovered from the injuries she had suffered during the battle and now sat next to Glover who had taken the head of the conference table at the opposite end.

"Again, I'm sorry to have kept you all waiting. There were some details we had to consider before we were able to begin," she said.

"Details on how best to convince us to give up our claims here and leave everything to you, I take it," said Toreth even while she didn't give up her calm posture or dropped that dangerous little smile.

"Contrary to what you may believe, Commander," she said. "The Federation is not here to stake any kind of claim. Certainly we are happy for the Xenarth to continue to remain where they currently are."

"You're contradicting yourself, Captain," said Rekar. "Not too long ago you were willing to go into battle over this system."

She fixed him with a stare. "Don't make the mistake of doubting our resolve here," she said and shot a look at Hugh as well. "While we respect

the Xenarth's sovereign right to chose their allies we cannot allow a permanent Romulan presence in a Federation system. I cannot imagine that you'd be willing to start a war over a system with limited strategic value and few resources worth mentioning."

"I have no interest in this star system or the people who have made it their home," said Hugh. "If you wish to battle amongst yourselves for control over it than that is your business alone."

"Last time I checked, Borg, you are in this system as well. If you wish it or not, you are involved here," said Toreth.

"Our only interest is to procure Particle 010. Once it is in our possession we will leave this system at once."

Maya noticed Ket's mandibles and feelers twitch nervously. "Your people came for our world before. They destroyed everything we've ever built along with billions of us. Your attack on our home, if it can be called that, is the only reason for our presence here now. And now you want to make us believe that your only design for what is left of the Xenarth Colony is this particle?"

All eyes in the room turned to look at the Artisan Queen.

Hugh appeared surprisingly sympathetic. "There are no words I could offer that could give justice to the horrors the Borg have been responsible for. All I can assure you is that my people and I are nothing like the Borg who destroyed your world. We are not driven by the singular mind of the Collective. We are individuals and we do not wish to harm anyone."

"A Borg with a conscience," said Rekar dismissively. "Now I've heard it all."

Hugh ignored the statement.

"Hugh, I believe what you say about not wishing to hurt people and not being driven by the Collective anymore. But how is your seemingly tenacious pursuit of this particle any different to what the Borg did to the Xenarth all this time ago?" Maya said.

"We may no longer be Borg," he said. "But there are still certain overarching desires we are simply unable to ignore. Particle 010 is the closest thing in the universe to total perfection and complete harmony. Its power could bring order to the chaos that has been created since we were cut off from the voice of the Collective. And it is more than that," he said and then stopped himself as if he was thinking of the right words to describe what he was trying to say. Ultimately he just shook his head. "I

am unable to put it in a way that could make you understand. This pursuit, for us it is simply beyond logic or reason. It is something much more unquantifiable."

"Almost sounds as if you're on a religious quest," said Terence Glover.

The former drone considered that for a moment. "I have studied the concept of religion and spirituality in various cultures and I have never been able to fully understand it," he said. "But you might be correct. I cannot explain to you adequately why we pursue Particle 010. All I can tell you is that we must."

Glover and Donners exchanged a concerned look across the table, both of them fully aware how difficult it would be to argue against a religious motive. It would throw reason and common sense right out of the airlock.

"A Borg cult that has rediscovered its spirituality is all really interesting," said Toreth, "but it doesn't alter the simple fact that the legitimate government on New Xenarth has chosen to become a Romulan ally. Therefore everything owned by the Xenarth, including this particle, is now under Romulan protection."

"And you seriously believe that you would be able to protect it?" said the younger of the two Borg. "You wouldn't survive five minutes in a battle with us."

Maya tensed as the hostility in the room was becoming more palpable.

"Perhaps not," the Romulan subcommander said with a self-satisfying smirk. "But our fleet will arrive here shortly and then you will find yourself in a much altered situation, I promise you that."

"Then we must act now," said the Borg and stood from his chair with surprising swiftness.

The armed guards responded instantly. In an unspoken agreement the two security officers quickly stepped closed to Donners and Glover to protect the high-ranking officers while the Marines kept their positions but drew their weapons to target the potential threat.

Donners waved them all off. "Don't let them rush you into a decision you might come to regret," she said urgently. "They know that if you attack now, we will not be able to stand on the sidelines. And in a battle between us and you, nobody is going to come out on top."

"Goval, calm yourself," said Hugh, addressing the other Borg.

"Why should I?" he responded. "This talk is pointless. We are so close to obtaining Particle 010 and we shall not be denied now. We cannot."

Hugh's influence on the other Borg seemed limited, Maya quickly realized, as the one called Goval did not return to his seat, preferring to hover over the other people in the room menacingly and keeping the Marines and security guards on high alert. "Talk is never pointless if it can avoid conflict," she said but found that she sounded lame even to her own ears now. The truth was that she was nowhere close to having achieved what she had set out to.

Hugh looked at her and for a moment she thought that maybe he was getting ready to make a compromise. As it turned out it wasn't the one she had hoped for. "Allow us to obtain 010," he said. "In return we will offer you our assistance against Romulan designs on this system. If we join forces they would not risk going into battle against us both."

Rekar tried to stand as well to protest but Toreth held him down by gripping his arm. Then she focused a deadly stare at Donners. "But you cannot do that, can you, Captain?" she said very methodically. "Because the truth you haven't revealed here yet is that you couldn't care less about this system or the Xenarth even if you pretend otherwise by having this convicted traitor to her people join this farce. The truth is you are only interested, as are we all, in this magnificent particle. You want it for yourself," she said, apparently reading the Starfleet captain like an open book now. Then she quickly shook her head. "No, that's not it, is it? You just want to keep it out of our hands. Don't you see, Hugh, it is the height of Federation arrogance and moral corruption. They talk about peace and cooperation but all they are truly interested in is to maintain the status quo," she said, keeping her laser-like focus on Donners as she spoke. "Tell us it isn't true, Captain. Tell us you are not here to destroy this particle at any cost rather than have it fall into your enemy's hands."

Maya knew past a shadow of a doubt that no matter what she'd say next, Toreth had already made up her mind. And why not? After all she had been absolutely correct about her mission and the Omega Directive.

"Listen to me," she said. "What we call the Omega molecule is powerful beyond even our understanding. Beyond yours," she said and looked at a self-satisfied Toreth. "Beyond that of the Xenarth," she added and shot a quick glance at Ket. "The Borg nearly wiped out an entire race to get their hands on it and who knows how many others they have done the same to," Maya said and looked at Hugh whose facial expression had

become difficult to interpret. "You want the truth? The truth is that no matter your intentions, by obtaining the Omega molecule and trying to utilize it for practical applications you risk not just your own lives but those of countless others in the galaxy. One misstep and you could destroy the very fabric that holds the universe together."

This time Rekar did jump to his feet. "I've had it with your haughty condescension," he said. "Admit that your only interest is to destroy the particle."

"It's the only way," Maya said.

"No," Hugh shouted as he left his chair so swiftly it fell over. "I will not allow it."

That's when the red alert klaxons came to life, startling the already agitated occupants in the observation lounge even further.

The words that followed were the kind that no starship captain ever wanted to hear, especially while away from the bridge and entirely ignorant of the events that had led to this particular moment.

"All hands, brace for impact."

Donners had just enough time to hold on to the table which turned out to be for naught as she was ripped out of her seat a moment later. Gravity went haywire and she found herself flying across the room and right towards an unyielding bulkhead.

Iota Crucis IV, 2267

What *Lexington's* away team found upon materializing on Iota Crucis IV was nothing short of impressive. The L-class planet had been considered by Starfleet as barely inhabitable but apparently that hadn't stopped the Xenarth from making it their home. And they had done so with surprising effort, considering Queen Selphi's own admission that this world had never been their destination, nor had they planned on staying here for long. At least if it were up to their current supreme.

Even more astonishing was what the Xenarth had achieved after only having arrived on this world a few years prior.

The rusty-red and rocky surface had been repurposed with huge, transparent domes, the largest of which were a good three hundred meters tall. The Xenarth worked and dwelled within the habitats in structures of various sizes. Most buildings were spiral-shaped, built in a corkscrew design and arranged in what looked like circular patterns with the tallest building close to the center of the habitat and surrounded on all sides by steadily lower structures. It almost gave it the appearance as if they had tried to emulate the look of an old-fashioned circus tent, made up of dozens of buildings, each one gleaming in uniform, metallic silver.

Each of the transparent domes was connected by an extensive network of equally transparent tubes, snaking along the surface in every which direction. The tubes not only provided wide walkways to easily reach the closer habitats, a rapid moving bullet-style train ran at the center to allow quick travel to other sets of habitats located further away.

Towering over the settlements was one single, massive structure. At least twice as high as the tallest habitat and painted in dark black, it bulged outwards towards the top not unlike an umbrella, trying to protect the domes below. This, Bob Wesley had learned, was the newest incarnation of the star portal. The same device which had brought the Xenarth to this

world and which was to be used once again to allow them to depart as well.

Commodore Wesley and his landing party consisting of Commander Kuznetsov, Doctor Vincent, Commander Zha'Tara, Lieutenant Mtollo and Doctor Bendes Ketteract were treated to a great view to all of this from their beam in location within a dome on top of a small mountain range at least five kilometers from the nearest cluster of habitats.

"This is amazing," said the Andorian science officer, standing next to her colleagues and taking in the sight presented to them in the valley below. "And you built all of this within only three years?"

Queen Selphi, who had greeted their arrival, and now stood nearby answered promptly. "The star portal transphased most of the materials we needed to re-build the Colony from Xenarth Prime. And while we lost a great many sisters and brothers in the process, we've always had a very dedicated work force. And those who remained, quickly took to the task of building a new home for us here," she sounded noticeably proud by what they had been able to achieve. "The structures on the surface are only part of what makes up our Colony. Each of the larger domes also has extensive subterranean dwellings which you are not able to see from this vantage point."

"Like busy little ants," said Vincent quietly as he too let his gaze wander across the settlement below.

"Hardly little," said Mtollo.

"How many of these settlements are there, Selphi?" said Wesley.

The Artisan Queen had been quick to point out that her name was all that was required when addressing her. "There are twelve main settlements across this continent of which this one is the largest," she said. "If it were up to some, we'd build many more on Xentarra."

Selphi gestured the team to follow her towards one of the corkscrew shaped buildings within the dome and the landing party followed.

Wesley had not missed the fact that they had been practically surrounded by armed guards from the moment they had arrived. They were distinctive by a golden moon-shaped symbol on their simple tunics which differed from the crescent symbol on Selphi's dress. The guards carried spears which appeared to be more sophisticated at second glance and kept a respectful distance. He could tell however by their stances and their erect feelers that they were on high alert. He doubted that the Xenarth had come across many, if any visitors since their arrival on this world.

He and his landing party quickly followed the Artisan Queen and the guards were close behind. "Xentarra? Is this was you have named this word?" he said.

"It is the name Supreme Ergia has chosen," she said and not doing a great job at hiding her disapproval. "It is an ancient term of my people which translates to 'Place In-Between'."

Vincent nodded in understanding. "The place in-between where you came from and where you're trying to get to," he said. "This Xendaru, was it?"

"Yes," she said sadly as they stepped into the building. "Ergia is more determined than ever to get us to Xendaru this time. She is convinced that an error in our original calculations landed us here by mistake but that this time we will end up in the right place."

"You do not sound convinced of this," said the Russian first officer.

She jerked her head slightly. "I fear that we are more likely to wipe ourselves out of existence than be able to transphase again. The Xendaru particle is far too unpredictable to be a reliable means of transportation. I am convinced our first transphase was pure luck. That is if you believe that losing more than half of the Colony can be considered lucky."

"That's why I'm here," said Ketteract. "I will help your people to stabilize the Omega molecule so that you'll be able to go on your marry way to wherever it is you are hoping to go."

"Doctor, with all due respect," said Vincent. "The Xenarth have had decades to study this molecule. You've had days. What makes you think that you'd be able to succeed where the Xenarth have failed?"

Ketteract looked almost hurt by the doctor's implication. "No disrespect to our hosts," he said and shot the tall insectoid a quick look. "But I have made incredible advances in quantum physics over the last two decades and I have long speculated of the existence of a super-particle not too unlike of what we've found here. Applying my groundbreaking research to the Xenarth's own findings, I am absolutely convinced, my dear doctor, that I will find a way to not only stabilize Omega but harness its power for the safe use for countless practical applications. Without exaggerating, I believe you are all about to be witnesses to a revolution in the making."

"Without exaggerating?" mumbled Mtollo and shot the others an incredulous look.

Zha'Thara replied with a little smirk to let the security officer know that they were getting used to the scientists' relentless hyperbole.

Selphi let her alien visitors enter a lift which was too small to allow for their entourage to follow. The Artisan Queen turned to the landing party after the doors had closed behind them and the lift had begun to move downwards. "I must make you aware of the precarious situations we find ourselves in at this moment in time," she said. "While Supreme Ergia may be determined to move forward with her plans to make use of the star portal once more, Queen Quelphi and her followers have made their opposition to this plan known quite publicly and relations between the castes are more strained than they have ever been in the past."

"Are you concerned that it could turn violent?" said Wesley.

Selphi didn't respond to this straight away, perhaps because she hadn't considered that question before. "For a queen to turn against the Aggregate and the decree of the supreme is unheard of," she finally said.

"But you said it yourself, the risks of using your Xendaru particle are enormous," said Vincent and immediately raised his hand to stifle a comment he expected from Ketteract on that subject. The scientist closed his mouth wisely and the chief surgeon continued. "Perhaps this warrior queen of yours is right to try and stop this from happening."

At that Selphi's antennae noticeably twitched. In indignation or agreement, not immediately apparent. "Don't misunderstand," she said. "While I may not fully agree with Ergia on her plans and I do believe that Quelphi's point of view of trying to make this world our new and permanent home instead warrants further consideration, I do not support the Warrior Queen. I believe her blatant xenophobia and lust for power are as dangerous to our people as Ergia's obsession with Xendaru. If Quelphi had her way, not only would we abandon the Xendaru particle, she would throw our entire world into a technological and social dark age from which we may never recover."

The lift arrived at its destination, the doors opened and Selphi promptly disembarked.

The *Lexington* landing party remained behind for just a couple of seconds longer, enough time to allow Vincent to shoot his captain an imploring look that seemed to say; *see what kind of mess you've gotten us into. You should have listened to me and stayed away.*

And Robert Wesley was beginning to think that his doctor may have been right all along.

Agamemnon, 2372

She heard a faint and distant voice calling her name and for just a moment she couldn't help but think of the stories she'd heard as a child of a very old and very wise man inviting her to join him in a glorious afterlife.

Then her vision cleared and she realized her mistake. She smirked despite herself when she saw Terrence Glover's concerned face looking down at her.

"Judging by that expression, I take it you enjoy being thrown around like a ragdoll," he said, not entirely able to hide his confusion.

She shook her head. "It's not that. Just a silly mix-up."

The response didn't dispel his puzzlement and she resolved to move on quickly. The last thing she needed was to reveal that he had mistaken him, if even for a split-second, for an omnipotent being. She doubted his already massive ego would survive the additional boost. "What happened?"

"I don't know yet. One moment your peace summit is falling apart, the next we're all flying through the air."

"Thanks for reminding me," she said and aimed a displeased look at her fellow captain. "Help me up."

He did and she immediately regretted the sudden movement. Her entire body felt as if it were on fire. She desperately wanted to hide the pain from Glover but failed as she winced noticeably.

"You'll need to go to sickbay," he said.

"I'll survive," she shot back as she finally got onto unsteady legs. She was forced to lean against the bulkhead however, at least until she could trust her aching bones again. "First I want to know what happened to my ship," she said and surveyed the room.

Chairs and a couple of plants were littering the floor. Subcommander Rekar was sitting up against a wall in a corner nursing what appeared to be

a broken arm while Toreth seemed to have little interest in aiding her fellow officer.

Ket was on all four arms and legs while a security officer tried to get her back onto her feet slowly.

Hugh was kneeling next to Goval who was lying on the floor unmoving.

One of the Marines was also down, his head bleeding from a vicious forehead wound and a female security officer was kneeling next to him with a tricorder.

The second Marine stood close by but had his weapon out and kept his eyes on the Borg and the Romulans in case they decided to use the distraction to make a move.

Maya admired the man's dedication to his duty but judging by the state of the people in the room, nobody was going to be able to make any kind of move any time soon.

Glover was rubbing his shoulder on which he undoubtedly had fallen.

The captain addressed the standing Marine first. "Get whoever needs medical attention to sickbay."

The man nodded sharply.

"We'll tend to our own, Captain," Hugh said as he looked up from his fallen man.

"Same goes for us," Toreth added quickly even if Rekar desperately looked as if he could have benefited from some immediate medical care.

"Suit yourself," she said and then tried a step towards the doors. The pain shooting through her bones was not easily ignored but somehow she managed nevertheless.

Glover was right behind her and he looked ready to steady her if the need would arise. Maya was determined not to let it come to that.

Hugh and Toreth left their wounded and followed Donners.

Terrence shot both of them incredulous looks. "And where do you think you're going? Transporter is that way," he said, pointing at the other set of doors.

Before either could protest, Donners waved Glover's objections aside. "You may join us on the bridge," she said and then to the security guards, "Make sure the others find their way back to the transporter room *after* you have seen to our wounded."

The two security officers and the conscious Marine quickly acknowledged.

Ket had gotten back on her slender feet and now slowly followed Donners, Glover, Toreth and Hugh out of the room.

"Report," said Maya the moment she stepped onto the bridge. But her eyes had already drifted towards the view screen which offered at least a partial explanation of what had happened.

"By the All-Mother," Ket muttered under her breath upon taking in the sight.

"What happened?" Hugh asked and moved closer to the screen.

Lure Mer'iab had immediately tensed upon seeing the Romulan and Borg commanders on the bridge and had a phaser clipped to his waist in seconds before offering a report. "The Borg vessel was severely damaged by an unknown energy discharge emanating from one of Iota Crucis' moons."

That was an understatement. The massive ship appeared to have been torn apart, literally split in half, the two pieces were now drifting aimlessly surrounded by a field of debris.

"Life signs," Donners said, unable to tear her eyes away from the carnage on the screen.

She didn't notice that Tess Allenby was actually sitting on the floor next to her station, holding on to a gushing wound on her temple. DeSoto was kneeling next to her, trying to treat it with a medkit.

Upon hearing the order she harshly shoved the ensign away and climbed back into her chair like the consummate professional she liked to present herself as. With one hand holding a bandage to her wound, she used the other to operate her console. "I'm reading about three-hundred life signs on the Borg ship. Many weak or fluctuating."

Hugh had also not been able to take his eyes off what had once been his ship either. "There are over one-thousand former drones on that ship."

"Not anymore," said Toreth dryly. "What exactly caused this?"

Maya wasn't crazy about the idea of a Romulan giving orders on her vessel but seeing as it would have been her next question, she let it slide.

"We didn't have much notice before the discharge hit but according to sensors the residual energy signature is consistent with the Omega molecule," said Daystrom who had seemingly weathered the impact in mostly one piece safe for a few bruises.

"A weapon?" said Toreth, unable to hide her fascination.

"Were we hit?" Donners asked.

Mer'iab quickly shook his head. "The Borg vessel appears to have been the only target for now."

Glover didn't seem satisfied with that response. "Then you want to explain why we were knocked on our collective butts as if we went through a class nine ion storm?"

The Aurelian security officer didn't appear to have an explanation ready for that.

"It's probably because of that," said DeSoto just as the screen shifted again.

The bridge fell silent as they saw what remained of one of Iota Crucis' moons. Maya likened the image on the screen to those she had once seen of the Klingon moon Praxis being torn apart due to a mining accident some eighty years ago. Perhaps a third of the satellite appeared to remain after the majority of it had shredded away and disintegrated. Its fiery red core lay bare and if the debris field around the crippled Borg ship had looked expansive, this one rivaled that of a massive asteroid belt.

"My God," said Donners.

"According to our sensors," began Daystrom, "the moon exploded roughly 0.23 seconds following the discharge."

"Could this all have been an accident?" said Ket.

"Not the discharge itself," said the science officer. "It was too precisely modulated and targeted."

"I think we can safely assume that the following explosion was not part of their plans," said Terrence. "They tried to weaponize Omega and blew up their own moon in the process."

"It was a success," said Toreth. "At least partially."

Maya turned on the Romulan woman. "You call that a success? Thousands of Xenarth were likely killed in that along with hundreds of people on the Borg ship," she said, her tone rising a little higher than she would have liked but the cold apathy in the Romulan woman's voice had gotten to her.

Noticing the many angry eyes resting on her, including the hate-filled look on Hugh's face, Toreth wisely decided to keep any further comments to herself.

"Captain, there is more," said Daystrom. "According to my calculations the shockwave has further destabilized subspace in this system and beyond. Sensors are registering multiple tears within the EM

spectrum making large pockets of the Iota Crucis system completely impassable now. I still need to analyze the data coming in but I also estimate that the subspace instability in this system has expanded by at least two light-years in every direction following the shockwave." The science officer never looked up or stopped working at his station as he eagerly sorted and analyzed the myriad of data being picked up.

"Tears in subspace," said Ket, her voice sounding small and weak as if she hadn't quite come to grips yet what had happened here. "What does all that mean?"

"It means that if something like this happens again, this entire system may be wiped off the face of the galaxy along with every last thing in it," said Glover.

Daystrom nodded absent-mindedly. "Crude analogy but essentially correct."

"All-Mother," the Artisan Queen mumbled.

"Your offer to assist us moving the Xenarth to a new home sounds much more appealing now," said Toreth.

Maya restrained herself from snapping at the Romulan again. Instead she found a couple of security guards which had since entered the bridge. "Gentlemen, please escort Commander Toreth to the transporter room," she said and shot the woman a cold glare. "I think it's time for you to return to your vessel."

Toreth merely nodded at the rather rude way she had been dismissed probably seeing no point in putting up a fight considering she was entirely outnumbered. She allowed the security guards to show her to the turbolift and promptly left the bridge.

"Smooth," said Terrence with a smirk but quickly dropped it when he noticed Amaya turning her evil eye on him next and not wishing to get a similar treatment.

Agamemnon's captain considered the Borg next. "Hugh, I'm sure I speak for Captain Glover as well when I say that we stand ready to assist you with any medical needs you may have."

The former drone turned away from the screen and coldly appraised the woman. "We take care of our own," he said and then touched a device attached to his upper arm before he shimmered out of existence in a green torrent of energy.

Donners sighed and looked at Glover who responded with a mere shrug.

Then she stepped over to her science officer. "Wayne, there were two Omega facilities in this system. What happened to the other one?"

Daystrom checked his sensors. "Iota Crucis IVb is still intact. We are picking up increased activity from the surface," he said and looked up. "And according to this they are in the process of ramping up Omega molecule production."

She nodded and turned back to her fellow captain. "We'll have to stop this from happening again. Another incident and we may lose the entire system and potentially destabilize subspace throughout the quadrant."

"What about your diplomatic solution?"

"We tried diplomacy and it didn't work," she said. "It's time for a more direct approach."

New Xenarth (Iota Crucis IV), 2372

Chaos reigned in the central command room.

A massive shockwave had hit New Xenarth just minutes earlier and it had brought with it significant structural damage as well as seismic instability all along the planet's northern hemisphere.

Two workers and three warriors had been crushed and had died instantly when chunks of debris had rained down from above.

The wraparound windows were smashed in many places and the sight of the city in which the tower stood was not encouraging. At least one dome had noticeably cracked under the pressure of the shockwave and hundreds of Xenarth inside were scrambling back and forth, desperately trying to evacuate before the transparent partition which protected them from the hostile atmosphere of Iota Crucis IV collapsed entirely.

Warrior Queen Samma was less preoccupied with the damage on the planet as her gaze was fixed upwards, looking through the cracked skylight and towards what had once been one of New Xenarth's moons but was now nothing more than a broken up shadow of its former self.

"What happened?" she said as she kept those dark eyes on the destroyed satellite.

Queen Liphra was busy trying to dig out some of her fellow worker from underneath debris, using all four of her hands to try and get to those unlucky enough to have been crushed under the weight.

Samma's feelers twitched with impatience as she turned her glance towards Liphra. "They are dead," she said sharply. "We can tend to them later. I need to know what has happened."

The Worker Queen stopped her efforts and appeared to consider the futility of her efforts for a moment before she moved on to one of the few still functioning monitors. "Apogee is destroyed. Completely destroyed," she said after a moment. "The facility is gone."

"I can see that," Samma said. "But why?"

"I ... I cannot say," she said as she tried to make sense of the readings. Then she looked around the room to find somebody else still alive who could assist with the task of interpreting the data. "We need scholars. Where are all the scholars?"

"Most of them left with Klestra," said Samma and looked back towards what remained of the moon.

Liphra followed her gaze. "All-Mother, no," she said when she understood. "They're all gone. The supreme ... is dead."

Those who remained in the control center fell silent as they considered the implications of their leader having been killed in whatever disaster had befallen the planetoid above.

"What do we do now?" asked the Worker Queen.

"The Artisan Queen is next in the line of succession in the Aggregate," said Nadelphi who had survived the damage with noticeable bruising. "So says the God-Queen."

Samma turned angrily on the Cleric Queen. She had secretly hoped that she had been killed or at least incapacitated following the destruction wrought onto New Xenarth and now found to her disappointment that she had been spared. "There is no Artisan Queen. Ket has been stripped of her title and declared a traitor to the Aggregate and the Colony. Appointing a new Artisan Queen has not been a priority."

"Then one must be found," she said. "It is the way of the All-Mother. An Artisan Queen must be the new supreme."

Samma uttered a sharp and annoyed whistle.

"Look," said Liphra urgently and advised one of her surviving workers to enhance an image on the monitor and to send it to the other still functioning displays. "The weapon, it was successful."

The Warrior Queen stepped closed to the screen to see for herself. Indeed one of the vessels which had entered their system without permission had apparently been ripped in half and now seemed entirely useless as it drifted in space. The sight immediately filled her with renewed hope and determination. "The others still remain?" she said.

It took the Worker Queen a moment to have their sensors recalibrated before she looked back at Samma and nodded.

"Then our work is not complete. I want all the foreign vessels destroyed. They have only seen a small taste of our true power. Soon they will all tremble at our might."

“But the facility,” Liphra protested. “It was obliterated after the weapon was used. We need a Scholar Queen to determine exactly what happened and how to avoid another accident.”

The Warrior Queen didn’t appear interested. “We have the second facility on Zenith. As to what happened, isn’t it obvious? They made a mistake. One that shall not be repeated. I shall send my best garrison to Zenith to ensure the scholars and workers there are properly motivated,” she said and pointed at the image of the destroyed vessel. “The weapon works. It is time that the Xenarth Colony reclaims its former glory as the greatest power among the stars.”

Agamemnon, 2372

“According to our sensor scans, the Omega facility is spread out over four subterranean levels with each level roughly three hundred square meters in size. The first level is made up of a shuttle hangar and storage bays. The second level holds science labs and administrative offices. We have located traces of boronite on the third level and the lowest level contains three separate Omega generators which we believe are in the process of synthesizing the molecule as we speak,” said Wayne Daystrom as he stood at the far bulkhead of *Agamemnon’s* observation lounge next to the wall-mounted monitor currently displaying a digital rendering of the facility he was talking about. Pointing at the various levels of the green-gridded diagram, the picture expanded further to show additional details such as the layout and floor plans.

His audience included his own captain, Arden Texx, Terrence Glover, Queen Ket, Security Chief Mer’iab, Beatiar Sh’Fane as well as his counterpart from *Cuffe*, the Alshain science officer Lieutenant N’Saba and *Cuffe’s* head of security, Lieutenant Meldin.

“What’s that structure on top?” said Maya Donners.

The science officer tapped on the tower to zoom in closer on the spire which stood at least two hundred meters tall and was shaped not unlike a huge flower vase with a broad base which slimmed towards the middle and then bulged out again at the top. “We’re not entirely certain as to the exact function of this device but it appears to be a conduit of some kind. Presumably it channels the Omega molecule for the purpose of an unknown practical application of its power,” he said.

“It’s a Star Portal,” said Ket.

“Come again?” Terrence Glover said.

“It’s how my people first came to be here. We used a similar device over one hundred of your years ago to transphase our Colony to this place. Or at least those who survived the journey.”

"You think your people are trying again?" said Commander Texx and then looked at Donners. "Playing devil's advocate for a moment, if they were to succeed in beaming themselves into another galaxy it sure solve some of our immediate problems."

"Nadelphi has been pushing hard for another attempt to transphase the Colony to Xendaru, the mystical realm of the All-Mother. But the Cleric Queen's influence in the Aggregate is not as it used to be, especially now that Klestra is dead," said the former Artisan Queen.

"Wait a minute," said Maya. "The supreme is dead?"

Ket jerked her head to the side to communicate a positive response. "She was killed by the destruction of the primary Xendaru facility on Apogee."

Texx and Donners exchanged a surprised look before the captain turned back to their Xenarth refugee. "That's information you may have wished to share with us sooner."

Her feelers drooped in an apologetic fashion. "I ask for your forgiveness. I have only learned of this a few short minutes ago while monitoring New Xenarth's radio frequencies."

"Okay, so the leader of your people was killed," said Glover. "I think the most important question now is, what happens next and how does it change things?"

"I'm afraid the change will not be for the better. I have no doubt that the Warrior Queen will convince the remaining Aggregate that she should assume power and Samma is much more belligerent than Klestra ever was. She will abandon the Star Portal and instead try her best to utilize the Xendaru particle as a weapon."

"And we've seen how that turned out," said Mer'iab.

Daystrom cleared his throat. "If their second attempt will be anything like the first, the damage will be far worse. Not only may Iota Crucis IV itself not survive losing another satellite, subspace may rupture completely in this system, swallowing up every last matter molecule within a light-year and making warp speed impossible, potentially in half the quadrant, perhaps even further."

The room fell silent for a moment as this doomsday scenario was being digested by the men and women in attendance.

The Andorian Marine was the first to break it. "Do we know how the weapon is deployed?"

When Daystrom didn't appear to have an immediate answer, the lupine Alshain Science Officer spoke up. Maya had suppressed the urge to shudder as she considered the wolf-like officer who looked more like a beast than a man. His azure-colored ocular implants gave him a cold and impassionate expression which stood in contrast to his otherwise wild and feral look. Donners' discomfort lasted less than a second and until she remembered that she had an avian security chief, an insectoid chief engineer and a Vulcan *le-matya* as a pet.

"It must be the Star Portal," he said as he studied the structure still displayed on the screen. "They must have adapted it so it can harness and release concentrated energy directly from those Omega molecule generators."

Daystrom nodded along. "That makes sense."

"Then our first priority is to blow the portal to pieces," said Glover.

But Mer'iab shook his head. "It's not an option. We've discussed targeted orbital bombardment of the facility to neutralize it but we are now fairly certain that the risks of accidentally damaging one of the Omega generators and risking an accident are far too high."

"Alright," said Texx. "How about beaming those generators right out of there?"

"We thought about that, too," said Wayne Daystrom. "Problem is that we cannot get a clear transporter lock on the generators or the molecules themselves due to the strong Omega radiation prevalent within the facility. And to be honest, the risk of something going wrong during transport is not one I'd like to take."

"Would've been too easy," mumbled Terrence.

Donners fixed his security chief with a pointed look. "I take it you have a plan, Lieutenant."

The tall avian swiftly rose from his seat and replaced Daystrom by the monitor. "The good news is that we've already anticipated the need for a ground assault on two separate facilities. As only one remains it will simplify our mission significantly."

"What's the bad news?" Glover said.

The security chief tapped a few control panels to show a small flotilla of cylindrical-shaped ships approaching the moon. "Our sensors picked up these vessels which we believe to be troop transporters landing at our target location less than an hour ago."

Terrence looked at Maya. "They send in reinforcements."

She nodded. "Is a ground assault still feasible?"

The Marine commander responded before Mer'iab had the chance, causing the security chief to frown noticeably. "We think so. We expect about 400 armed hostile troops guarding the facility by now. We'll have access to the full security complement of both *Agamemnon* and *Cuffe*, that's 124 security personnel plus 87 of my Marines."

"That's still 2-to-1," said Maya.

This time the Aurelian managed to beat Sh'Fane to it. "Our people are significantly better equipped. And thanks to Queen Ket we were able to gain valuable intelligence on Xenarth weaponry, equipment and physiology."

"Perhaps there is another way," said the Xenarth queen.

Maya gestured for her to continue. If there was a way in which she could avoid putting troops onto the ground, she wanted to hear it.

"I could try and reason with the Aggregate. Make them understand that if they do not voluntarily give up the Xendaru ... the Omega molecule, that they would not survive a Starfleet assault to shut it down."

Silence befell the observation lounge again and judging from the pained expressions on most faces, nobody seemed to be particularly convinced of this plan. But then again none of the assembled officers wanted to be the one to tell the only Xenarth in attendance that they had no other choice but to go to war with her people.

Lieutenant Meldin ultimately was the one to break the bad news. The blue-skinned Benzite slowly shook his head. "We cannot risk warning the Xenarth of the impending assault or we lose the element of surprise."

Glover nodded, coming to his officer's defense. "Agreed. There is enough resistance in the facility at the moment already. If we tip them off now, they may send further reinforcements making this option no longer viable."

Maya could tell that Ket was disappointed by that response, judging by the way her feelers and mandibles twitched slightly, even if she tried an awkward nod to show her understanding.

She knew of nothing else to add and considered the security officers and Marine again. "I still don't like the odds here. We'll have about 200 men taking on 400 armed Xenarth. How do we avoid this becoming a blood bath on either side?"

Mer'iab, having expected this question, was quick to field it. "Simple, we don't take on their entire force at once," he said and referred

back to the display. "The majority of the hostile troops are stationed on the second level. Our targets are the boronite cache on the third level and the generators on the fourth. The facility is too heavily shielded to beam directly to the third or fourth level."

"Instead," continued Sh'Fane, "we will deploy a number of tactical drones to simulate a frontal attack by beaming them directly onto the first level. In the meantime *Agamemnon* and *Cuffe* will carry out a highly orchestrated orbital bombardment sequence which in reality will function as cover for drilling four deep cavities into the surface of the moon at strategic locations at the outer edges of the facility, allowing four teams in shuttles to penetrate the lower levels from the outside."

Maya was still not entirely pleased with this plan and while she didn't put this into words, everyone in the room could tell by her stern expression that her doubts had not yet been alleviated.

Sh'Fane picked up on this first. "Obviously we have to be quick about this. The diversion will not last long and eventually the Xenarth soldiers will realize that we are already inside. Again thanks to Queen Ket's information and studying her physiology, Doctor Rass has been able to determine phaser frequencies which are more likely to show a result against their hardened exoskeletons. In fact we also found certain weak spots which if targeted will allow us to take down and neutralize any Xenarth soldiers quickly and efficiently."

Ket stood from her chair, causing everyone in the room to look her way. Her mandibles were twitching much more noticeably now which Maya interpreted as resentment. Before she could think of offering any words to calm the former Xenarth queen, she spoke up. "If you ... if you would excuse me," she said and quickly headed for the doors.

The officers in the room looked after her.

Mer'iab shot the Marine commander a frosty look. "Well done, Lieutenant. Real tactful."

The Andorian flushed slightly, clearly embarrassed by this incident. "I'm sorry I didn't think—"

Donners held up her hand to cut Sh'Fane off, not willing to discuss this matter further for now. Instead she turned to look at Daystrom. "We've heard the tactical plan of how to get our teams into the facility. What do we do once inside?"

"The boronite is straight forward and we should be able to destroy it with our phasers. As for the Omega generators, our plan is simply to

interrupt the main power supply for each generator which should immediately stop the Omega molecule development process. We should even be able to scan the generators so that we could potentially copy the process the Xenarth have employed to synthesize the molecule ourselves," the science officer said.

Glover frowned. "Our mission is to destroy the molecules, Lieutenant, not create our own."

"I'm aware of this, sir, but we do have an opportunity here to better understand what we are up against. We shouldn't waste it."

"I freely admit that there are some orders I openly disagree with," he said. "But this isn't one of them. Our mission is to take out Omega no matter what and I intend to do just that. I'm also concerned of what to do with these generators if they have already created any molecules. Will pulling the plug be enough to destroy them?"

Daystrom looked visibly uncomfortable by that question. "No," he said after hesitating for a moment. "We'd risk a loss of containment if we were to do that. The result could be catastrophic."

"Just what I thought," said Glover with a smirk. "That's why we have a plan B. A specially designed resonance chamber. We use pattern enhancers to beam the molecules in, activate the chamber and voilà. No more molecules."

The science officer shook his head. "We considered this but building such a chamber would be too time consuming."

At this N'Saba spoke up. "Expecting this kind of problem, we've already started building it on *Cuffe*. Commander Rojas, our chief engineer, is confident the chamber will be up and ready within the hour. Two at most."

Daystrom looked as if he wanted to protest but Maya spoke up before he had the chance. "Sounds to me like we have a decent plan in place including a contingency."

"The only matter left to resolve, sir, is who should lead the assault team," Mer'iab said. "I believe the obvious choice would be me."

As expected Sh'Fane took issue with this. "I don't see how you are the obvious choice at all," she said and then considered the captain. "This is clearly a military operation and as such I should handle this."

Terrence Glover couldn't suppress a large grin coming over his lips. "Are these two always like this?"

Maya rubbed her forehead. "You don't even know the half of it. Wait until you get to have Marines stationed on your ship and ask your security people to play nice with them."

Both Mer'iab and Sh'Fane averted their glances.

"A third of the people taking part in this assault are from my team," said Lieutenant Meldin. "I am more than capable to lead this mission."

Judging by the looks from both the Marine commander and *Agamemnon's* chief of security, neither one liked that suggestion very much.

Glover nodded. "I agree. Lieutenant Meldin is the right man."

Maya looked over the assembled officers. "That'll be all for now. I will advise you shortly on who will lead the away team. Captain, Commander, would you mind staying behind for a moment."

Everyone except for Glover and Texx cleared the room.

"Well that was interesting," said Glover the moment they had the observation lounge to themselves. "Are you sure they're not going to turn on each other instead of fighting the Xenarth?"

"We'll put them into different teams. They'll be fine," said the first officer.

Glover grinned. "Separated like school children."

"If they weren't as good at what they do I would have them both relieved of duty but I don't think we can afford to do that considering what we're up against," said Maya and stood. "As for who will lead the away team, that's easy. I'll do it."

Both officers shot the woman astonished glances.

"Cap, that's not a good idea. Putting aside for a moment that it goes against regs, this is a high-risk mission and the chances that you could be injured or worse are simply too great. If you want a command officer on this, I can take the lead."

"Spoken like a true XO," said Glover.

Texx aimed an irritated look at the other captain. "You're not backing me up on this?"

He shrugged. "I don't want Maya in harm's way any more than you do but I've never been a big fan of the 'let's-treat-the-captain-with-kid-gloves' rule. I'd be a hypocrite if I tried to talk her out of it now."

"Thanks," said Amaya.

"I just hope you're not doing this because you feel you have something to prove. That'd be stupid. It's your first mission. You don't have to go and try to get yourself killed to gain the respect of your crew."

Maya shook her head. "Nothing to do with that," she said and took her seat again. "The truth is that I'm still struggling with the whole concept of what we are trying to do here. Don't get me wrong, I understand the dangers of the Omega molecule but sending troops against a sovereign government to destroy their technology stands against everything I believe in. It goes against the oath I swore when I first put on the uniform," she said and looked up at Glover. "I can't tell my own people to carry out such a mission and sit back in my comfortable chair pretending it has nothing to do with me. I have to be there for myself as much as for my crew."

Agamemnon, 2372

“Please come in,” the voice said after the door chime to her quarters had been activated.

The doors parted to allow the ship’s counselor and chief engineer to enter.

“Chen,” said the former Xenarth queen. “Mister Vej.”

“Please,” the counselor said with a smile. “Plain Vej is more than sufficient.”

Ket jerked her head slightly to the side and then considered the both of them.

“May we sit?” the counselor said, pointing at seating arrangement near the slanted windows.

“Of course,” she said and took the couch while her two visitors took two of the other seats facing her.

“What, if I may ask, brings you here?”

Chen’s feelers were standing almost fully erect, a sign of his own anxiety.

“If you are concerned about me, you shouldn’t be,” she said.

“Ket you are actively helping us trying to fight your own people,” said Vej. “Any anger or anxiety you may feel because of this is absolutely understandable.”

The Artisan Queen focused her large compound eyes on the Ullian and while he couldn’t be certain, he thought they were mirroring irritation. “People who have cast me out as a traitor. People who do not wish to listen to reason and instead blindly follow a path that is leading to their own destruction.”

Vej nodded. “Yes. But nevertheless *your* people,” he said. “And while you may have fallen out of favor with the current leadership, am I not correct in pointing out that you harbor no ill-will or animosity towards

your people in general. Towards the very individual Xenarth we will be meeting in battle.”

At that she promptly diverted her eyes, looking off into the empty room instead.

Chen leaned forward. “The captain fully understands your distress, Ket. I understand it. I don’t think anyone on this ship would not feel the way you do now if the situation were reversed. And the captain wants you to know that she is determined to make every effort to use only non-lethal means against the Xenarth protecting the facility.”

“And what if that is not enough?” she said and looked at Chen. “I may not be an expert yet of understanding your people but I can tell what they are thinking. Your security chief and the Andorian, they are warriors and they will do whatever it takes to secure victory.”

The chief engineer didn’t have an immediate response and Ket stood from her chair to step towards the window. “I don’t blame them for that. After all I was fully aware of how they would use the information I volunteered when they questioned me. I knew exactly why they wished to probe and study me when I allowed them to do so,” she said. “Perhaps that is why this is so difficult for me. I was almost too eager to let them know everything I knew about the warrior caste and the Xenarth in general. But deep down I knew they would use this to hurt my people.”

“But you also understand that it is not our wish to hurt them,” the counselor said and stood. “In fact by assaulting the Omega particle, we are hoping to avoid a disaster befalling New Xenarth as well as the entire quadrant.”

“And yet I am not allowed to try and talk to them first and attempt a diplomatic solution,” she said without turning to face her visitors.

Chen also stood. “You know this Warrior Queen who I understand is now in charge better than any of us,” he said and took a small step towards her. “Do you really think she would listen to reason? That she would agree to stand down from trying to synthesize the Omega molecule and turn it over?”

The Xenarth did not respond to this and her silence appeared to be an answer in itself.

“You needn’t be here when this begins,” the counselor offered. “We don’t have the time to take you away from here but the captain is more than happy to lend you a small shuttle and a pilot to take you to Starbase 10 until this matter has been resolved.”

That caused her to turn to face him. "Run away?" she said. "And what do you suggest I do there?"

"We discussed this before," Chen said. "After all this is over the Federation will be very interested to try and open diplomatic channels with the Xenarth. And who better to speak for your people than you?"

Her feelers dropped noticeably. "An outcast?"

"A good-will ambassador," Vej said.

"And while I cannot join you now, I promise I will come find you after this is over and together I will show you everything you've ever wanted to know about the Federation. And we can convince them to make every resource available to try and heal the rift between the Federation and the Xenarth."

At that the counselor shot the chief engineer a surprised look. Clearly Chen had not shared the promise he had made Ket earlier with anyone else.

She stepped closer to him. "I still wish to do that," she said. "I still want to see all these marvelous worlds that make up this Federation of yours. I still want to try and educate my people and try to make them understand that isolation is not the answer and to embrace the diversity that is waiting right by our doorstep."

"Then do so," the chief said. "In fact, let us do it together."

Her mandibles closed tightly and then she lowered her head until they rested against her chest. "No."

"Ket."

She looked up at Chen. "Not like this. I'm not going to run away now that I have betrayed my people. I am not going to turn my back on this assault of yours when I am chiefly responsible for it. I will remain on this ship and watch closely what I have done to my own people. And afterwards, if I can bare it, I will take you up on your offer and go see your Federation," she said and turned away from her two guests.

It was clear the conversation was over and both Chen and Vej excused themselves before they left her quarters behind.

Once outside the chief engineer turned to look at the counselor. "Will she be alright, you think?"

He considered that for a moment. "You care for her a great deal, don't you?"

Chen diverted his eyes, saying nothing.

"It's alright, Commander. Your secret is safe with me but you should be aware that the attraction is plainly obvious and clearly reciprocated."

He didn't look at him when he spoke. "At first I thought it was merely biological. Pheromones perhaps and the fact that I have never encountered another race so much like mine and yet also so different. But it is more than that."

The Ullian nodded. "And you are willing to give up your career in Starfleet for her."

He looked right at him when he responded. "For her. Yes."

Vej put a hand on his shoulder. "She'll be fine, Chen. It won't be easy for her to watch us go into battle with her kin, knowing that we'll use the knowledge we've gained from her against them, but eventually she'll come to grips with the fact that it was necessary. Intellectually she already understands this. Ultimately she will do so emotionally as well. And she won't be able to ask for a better guide to steer her through that than you."

Chen's feelers perked up. "Thank you, Counselor."

He gave the Xindi a warm smile before they headed out in opposite directions. Vej had another person to see and he was fully aware that his next appointment was going to be an entirely different kind of challenge.

* * *

Counselor Vej found Lieutenant Lure Mer'iab in cargo bay two where he was in the middle of organizing what must have been the largest single assault force the Ullian had ever seen.

Scores of security crewmembers wearing black flack jackets with a golden stripe across their chest were being equipped and seemingly assigned into different teams. The entire thing looked like chaos to the counselor at first until he realized the efficient logic behind it. The process was surprisingly quiet considering the number of people involved, save for Chief Holly and a couple of his NCO colleagues shouting out names at regular intervals. The crewmember in question quickly stepped up to pick up his gear and then was pointed to one of four groups at each corner of the cargo bay.

Agamemnon's chief of security was overlooking the entire affair from above, standing on the upper walkway which surrounded the cargo bay.

Vej found a ladder and climbed upwards to join the avian.

"I suppose you are used to seeing things from a higher angle," he said with a little smirk.

The Aurelian considered the counselor for only a second, aiming a rather annoyed, sidelong glance his way.

From all the senior officers on board, Vej had found Mer'iab to be the most difficult individual to approach. Part of that he had expected, fully cognizant that security personnel often didn't have much use for counselors. Their solution to most problems involved picking up a rifle and getting ready for a fight whereas his job was to find a more diplomatic resolve. In this instance, with the safety of the entire quadrant at stake and facing a belligerent and xenophobic opposition, he had given up early to try and sell Donners on a peaceful solution. That was not to say of course that he hadn't tried.

Vej suspected that the avian's reason for his dislike went further than their professional difference however and it didn't take long for the security chief to confirm those suspicions.

"This area is off-limits to civilians," he said but having already redirected his focus to what was happening below.

It was apparent that Mer'iab didn't care for the fact that Donners had decided to bring in a civilian counselor. As far as he was concerned you either wore the uniform or you didn't belong on a Starfleet ship. And certainly not on the bridge or other sensitive areas and having the ear of the captain. Vej couldn't completely fault the security chief for thinking that way.

"The captain wanted me to make sure that you're alright," he said.

At that Mer'iab turned back to look at the Ullian, his eyes noticeably growing larger. "The captain is concerned about my ability to carry out this mission?"

"I'm sure you have found by now that the captain is concerned about all the officers under her command," he said and quickly raised his hand before he could respond. "And I don't mean to say that she questions their competencies, merely that she is still getting to know everyone. As all of us are."

Mer'iab turned to look below again. "You may tell the captain that there is no reason to be concerned about me. I will carry out the mission exactly as ordered and to the best of my abilities."

"I don't think she is worried about your abilities."

"Then may I ask what you are doing here?"

"I said the captain is not worried."

This earned him another dark look.

"I've seen your file, Lieutenant. I know you are more than capable. Over your career you've fought in numerous engagements including against the Cardassians and the Tzenkethi, both of which were probably tougher enemies than the Xenarth. And before that you served two campaigns in the Aurelian Defense Force. Nobody on this ship is questioning your abilities."

"And they shouldn't."

"But this operation is different to anything you've ever partaken in before," the counselor said.

Mer'iab shook his head. "I don't see how. During the border wars we fought in skirmishes much larger than this."

"But you weren't in command, were you? And you didn't have to coordinate with teams from other starships or even other Starfleet branches."

"I know where you are going with this, Counselor," he said and turned to look at him again, unfurling his wings slightly which Vej had already realized was a dead give away of his frustration. "But Lieutenant Sh'Fane, Lieutenant Meldin and I have come to an understanding on how to proceed."

"And this understanding means that you are keeping your teams separate?" he said. "How does this work exactly? From what I understand the mission requires four teams but you have only three teams. There is no way you can work entirely independently, is there?"

"We have an understanding."

Vej looked down to take in the sight of the many security crewmembers setting up. "I don't see any of Sh'Fane's Marines down there. And I could be mistaken but I don't think you have anyone from the *Cuffe* here either."

It wasn't difficult to tell that the security chief was getting annoyed with this conversation. "Counselor, do you have any experience in security work?"

"Can't say that I do."

"Do you have any tactical training by chance?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

“Than what makes you think that you know how to prepare for this mission any better than I do?”

“Common sense?”

Those wings unfurled a little further.

“Lieutenant, I know you don’t like me very much and that’s fine but I want you to consider one last thing.”

“Make it quick, I still have a lot of work to do.”

“You’ve quite rightly pointed out that I don’t know much about security work but am I not right in saying that one of your most important jobs is to protect your captain at all cost,” he said. “Of course I could be mistaken about that point.”

It had been like hitting his most vulnerable spot the way he practically whirled on the counselor. He caught himself by taking a deep breath before he started speaking. “Not only do you appear ignorant of my duties, Counselor but also of my people. As an Aurelian I am honor-bound to protect my master and commander at all times, even if it means laying down my own life to do so. I would be disgraced in the eyes of the High Thane if I would willingly let harm come to her.”

He nodded. “Okay. Then consider this, Lieutenant. Captain Donners has decided to lead this mission herself, putting her life at great risk and if I’m not entirely mistaken, ignore regulations pertaining to such things. I am convinced that one of the reasons she has decided to do this is because she doesn’t trust you or Lieutenant Sh’Fane to be able to work well together as a team. And considering recent history she has no reason to. Now answer me this,” he said and looked straight in his eyes. “If something were to happen to the captain down there as a direct result of her lack of confidence in your ability to work with Sh’Fane, at whose feet do you think the High Thane would place the blame for this?”

They kept looking into each other’s eyes for a moment while the security chief clearly didn’t have an immediate answer. Vej didn’t need him to have one straight away.

“Good day and good luck, Lieutenant,” he said and headed for the exit.

"For the record, I think this is a mistake," said the lithe Kriosian first officer as she stepped into the turbolift next to Captain Glover.

"Bridge," said Terrence and then shot Nandali Kojo a sidelong glance. "Just because you keep saying that doesn't mean I'm going to change my mind about this."

The woman with the cinnamon-colored skin was not willing to drop the matter just yet, she was too much of a fighter to give up so easily and Terrence was hardly surprised. A woman who had once been married to a Klingon warrior knew how to fight her battles. "Donners is inexperienced and untested. Being a first officer on a starbase and your father's adjutant does not make her qualified to lead men into battle. You should have let me lead the away mission."

Kojo also tended to speak her mind quite freely. It was a propensity Glover could respect. Most of the time. "I don't care for your tone, Commander."

"This mission is too important to allow a novice taking the reins," she continued as if she had not just been reprimanded by her superior officer.

"We were all novices sometime."

"The safety of the entire quadrant could be at stake here. Do you honestly believe this is the kind of mission that suits itself as her proving ground?"

He smirked at that. "Always been big on trial by fire."

She responded with a serious expression. "All due respect, I think you're letting your personal feelings for Captain Donners cloud your judgment."

"Computer, halt lift."

The turbolift immediately stopped and the broad-shouldered captain of the *Cuffe* wheeled on his first officer, causing her to flinch slightly by the unexpected gesture before quickly steeling herself again.

“Respect has been sadly lacking from this entire conversation, Commander. I believe I give you plenty of leeway on this ship to speak your mind but you’re dangerously close to stepping over that line,” he said, his voice low but firm. “Amaya is a friend and nothing more and if I were really as concerned about her as you seem to be implying, I would have made sure that I’d lead that mission not you and certainly not her. And if that had been the case, would you have preferred her to be in charge of *Cuffe* while I’d be gone?”

To her credit, the woman held his piercing gaze and Terrence couldn’t help but admire her for it. “I suppose not.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said and turned back around to face the doors. “Computer, continue.”

“Just a friend and nothing more?” Kojo mumbled under her breath and aimed a furtive glance into his direction.

He had a little smirk on his face. “Absolutely.”

The doors to the lift opened and the two officers stepped onto the bridge.

“Report,” Kojo barked, beating the captain to it by a mere heartbeat.

Lieutenant Commander Bheto quickly rose from the command chair in one fluid motion, her blue antennae standing at attention. “All shuttles and runabouts are on course and on track to make planetfall in exactly ...” she shot a quick glance at the countdown displayed at the corner of the main viewscreen, “seventeen minutes and twelve seconds.”

Kojo nodded and the Andorian returned to her usual station at operations while Glover reclaimed his seat.

Operation Pandora’s Box as Donners had taken to call it, presumably because of both Omega’s and *Agamemnon*’s Greek connections and more importantly the danger inherent to the unstable molecule, was now well underway and as far as Terrence could recall, it was perhaps the single largest operation he had ever been part of involving only two starships. A total of 200 security personnel and Marines, ferried on twelve shuttles and two runabouts were about to engage a significantly larger force in a ground battle without the direct assistance of transporters or effective orbital bombardment. He didn’t exactly envy Amaya for having chosen to lead that mission.

“Captain, we may have a problem,” said the Andorian only moments after she had taken ops again.

"We're not even two minutes into this mission, Commander. How about holding off with problems until we are further along?"

"I wish it could wait."

Glover stood and took position behind Bheto, Kojo quickly joining him at his side. "What is it?"

"Romulans, sir," she said.

"Toreth is making a move. Now?" asked the first officer.

But Bheto shook her head. "It's not the *Khazara*. She has remained cloaked ever since the attack on the Borg vessel. This is worse," she said and then manipulated her controls to display a tactical map of the sector onto the main screen.

Glover looked up to see the Iota Crucis system along with a number of small blue Starfleet deltas indicating *Cuffe*, *Agamemnon* and the shuttles and runabouts approaching the moon. Not too far away was an icon symbolizing the disabled Borg ship. Other than that, he found the map showing nothing else of note.

Kojo seemed to have arrived at the same conclusions. "What are we looking at here, Commander?" she said, her voice betraying a hint of impatience.

"Give me a moment," she said and worked her console again.

The screen was overlaid with a higher resolution sensor filter and then zoomed in closer to a position less than a light-year from Iotia Crucis IV to focus on three blurry signals, barely visible with the naked eye.

"Okay," said Glover. "What's that?"

"My best guess is that those are three Romulan warbirds on a direct intercept course and traveling at full impulse under cloak."

"Then why can we see them at all?" said the first officer.

"The recent release of Omega molecules is playing havoc with the fabric of subspace in this system and beyond," she said. "Commander N'Saba might be able to explain the science better than I can, but to put it in layman's terms, the Romulan cloaking devices seem to be unable to cope with it when traveling at high impulse."

Glover nodded, pretending the explanation didn't bore him. "The more important question is how much time do we have until they get here?"

Bheto looked up. "At their current rate of travel, I say less than three hours."

The first officer's attractive facial features turned into one of grave concern. "That's not giving us a lot of time for the away teams to locate and destroy the Omega molecules."

"There is always something," Terrence muttered and headed back to his chair. "Glover to Rojas."

"Commander Rojas here, go ahead, sir," the chief engineer's voice responded over the internal comm.

"Pedro what's the progress on your fancy resonance chamber?"

"We've all but finished with the exterior framework. We're now in the process of calibrating the actual resonance force fields. It's a tricky process but N'Saba thinks we can start testing it within an hour or so. Two at the most."

Glover sighed. "Pedro, I've told Donners and everyone else that we're all but done with this thing and now you're telling me this? You're not going to make me a liar now, are you?"

"This is very sensitive equipment we're talking about. If we don't get this just right and we try to beam the molecules into the chamber, we might blow us up in the process. Not to mention destroy half the quadrant."

"Do me a favor and spare me the lecture on the inherent risk of the Omega molecule. Trust me, I'm well aware. Just get this done and done fast. Glover out."

"Put me through to Captain Donners on the *Nelson Mandela*."

Moments later Amaya's face appeared on the view screen, sitting in the pilot chair on board of her runabout. Glover wasn't surprised that she was helming the small vessel herself. She was about as hands-on a captain he had ever encountered.

She handed the controls over to her pilot before she turned to face her fellow captain. *"I don't like that expression,"* she said, apparently quite able to read the worry lines crossing his brow.

"No reason you should," he said. "We've detected more Romulans on their way to crash our party. They're limited to impulse thanks to the subspace damage but they are already close enough for us to smell their ale. We have three hours, maybe less."

"Damn," she said. *"They did mention that their reinforcements were on their way. Once they get here, with the Khazara already lurking, we'll be completely outgunned."*

Glover nodded. "You may not have time to try and neutralize every single particle you find down there. Which means you may have to beam them right into our resonance chamber instead."

She looked suspicious. *"I'd be more comfortable shutting things down from the ground than start beaming unstable molecules onto your ship. Besides, will the chamber be ready?"*

"Yes," he said with utter confidence.

It was enough to convince her and she nodded. *"Alright. We'll try our absolute best to neutralize the molecules first but if we do run out of time, we'll use the resonance chamber. Once Omega is out of the picture we'll scuttle the generators and the Romulans should lose their designs on the Xenarth and this system."*

"That's the plan."

She looked pained at that. *"You know what they say about plans."*

"All we can do now is let it play itself out and deal with any problems if and when they arise."

She nodded in agreement. *"We're less than fifteen minutes from insertion."*

Terrence glanced at the view screen. "Orbital bombardment will commence in eight," he said. He hadn't agreed initially with the plan that would commence a fake orbital bombardment before the shuttles had even made contact, arguing that it would cause them to lose the element of surprise. But he also understood that it was necessary to mask their true intentions, drilling deep into the surface of the moon to allow the assault teams to attack from below.

"Make sure your aim is true," she said. *"We're going to be right in your line of fire."*

"I'll try to remember that," he said with a smirk. "After all you still owe me that dinner you promised me back on DS5."

She smiled good-naturedly. *"We make it out of this in one piece and you've got yourself a date, mister."*

"I've already picked the wine."

She nodded sharply. *"See you on the flipside, Captain. Donners Out."*

And with that she disappeared from the screen.

Kojo aimed a rather displeased look at her captain after the channel had closed.

Terrence felt what was coming and pre-empted it. "Stow it, Commander."

Iota Crucis IV, 2267

The underground complex was enormous compared to the relatively small domed habitat which sat on the mountain above it.

The entire thing reminded Robert Wesley of a massive beehive, turned inside out. It had a similar shape and consisted of a huge empty space at its center with at least three dozen individual levels surrounding it. An entire army of Xenarth worked here, all busily heading back and forth the various levels and in and out of the countless doorways which presumably led to other parts of the facility.

He could spot the Iota Crucis' sun shining in the rust red sky through a large clear pane some hundred meters above and at the very top of the subterranean complex.

Another armed contingent of guards had been awaiting their arrival but most of the Xenarth down here looked like workers or researchers of some kind and many wore tunics with a cross-shaped symbol.

Their curiosity was not easily missed and many stopped and stared when they noticed Selphi lead the alien landing party along to their destination.

Wesley was still hard-pressed to be able to distinguish the individual Xenarth. He was reasonably sure that many of the workers were male, which he thought were differentiated by their less curved body shape and the lack of any facial markings.

The Artisan Queen showed them to a lab large enough to rival the size of *Lexington's* shuttle bay. It was dominated by a huge blast shield set into the far wall at about ten feet above floor level. Considering how thick and sturdy the shield looked, whatever was kept behind it had to be enormously powerful.

The lab was filled with computer consoles and machinery and dozens of scientists. But the flurry of activity seemed to come to an abrupt standstill when the Starfleet party entered.

“Supreme,” said Selphi and slightly lowered her head in a gesture of respect. “I have brought you the visitors as you have requested.” She hardly had to raise her voice, considering how quiet the lab had become.

It didn’t take Wesley and the others long at all to determine which Xenarth was the leader of her people. Differently to the others, Queen Ergia wore an elaborate cloak with fine golden stitching all along the back. The stitching itself appeared to be a delicate piece of art, commemorating Xenarth history, mythology or both. On the front she wore a prominent moon-shaped symbol.

Ergia was flanked by two armed guards, also with moon-shaped tunics. Bodyguards.

She had been in conversation with another fellow queen, judging from her slightly more elaborate clothes which set her apart from most of the workers in the room. She wore a prominent cross-shaped medallion and appeared smaller and somehow younger than Ergia or even Selphi.

“Please meet Robert Wesley and members of his vessel’s crew,” said the Artisan Queen.

The supreme stepped towards the landing party, her bodyguards only a few steps behind her. Differently to Selphi she carried herself with much more importance. But to Wesley it appeared to be more than just the presumptuousness that came naturally to a leader of an entire people. He had seen this before among high-ranking members of the clergy of many different worlds. A sense that they had a gods-given infallibility which placed them on a lofty plane far above the rest of their fellow kinsman and one that only they alone were privy to.

Wesley understood that this would make matters a lot more difficult for him. “Queen Ergia, please allow me to officially extend greetings to you on the behalf of the United Federation of Planets. We consider it to be a great honor to make the acquaintance of new and unfamiliar races and to welcome them to our interstellar community.”

Ergia looked Wesley and his people over for longer than was necessary. She was but a few inches taller than the commodore but held her mandibles up as if she towered many meters above him. “We have little interest in your community, Commodore. You have been invited here for only one purpose. To assist us rejoin the All-Mother.”

“And this is exactly why we have come,” Ketteract said, clearly out of turn, and took a step forward, causing the bodyguards to level their spear weapons at him instantly and stopping him in his tracks.

“And you are?”

“Doctor Bendes Ketteract. At your service.”

“Yes. You are the man who claims that you can be of assistance to us in stabilizing the Xendaru particle. Our Scholar Queen has been eager to make your acquaintance,” she said and used one of her four arms to summon forward the one she had spoken to earlier.

She didn’t hesitate and quickly placed herself next to the supreme.

“Chelra has only recently been elevated to become a member of the Aggregate and therefore does not possess the knowledge and wisdom of her predecessor, the former supreme and esteemed Scholar Queen Semunstra who was regretfully killed during the transphase. However, she is eager and I am certain that with your help, we shall be successful in activating the Star Portal once more.”

If the new Scholar Queen felt slighted by the supreme’s somewhat belittling tone, her insectoid features did well to hide it.

Wesley spoke up before Ketteract got the chance. “We will need a few days to familiarize ourselves with your research and I cannot make any promises as to the end result.”

Ergia did not seem to like what he had said as her large compound eyes focused on Queen Selphi who stood to one side but said nothing.

Then she looked back at the Starfleet officers and Ketteract and spoke, seemingly without addressing anyone in particular. “You have three days to have the Star Portal operational again. If you fail, you will be removed from Xentarra and leave this system. If you do not, you shall be purged,” she turned to Chelra. “Ensure that their scholars get every assistance they require.”

“Yes, my queen.”

“Selphi, the other aliens shall remain in the main settlement until the scholars have completed their work. See that they are constantly under guard.” And with that she turned away with her bodyguards and promptly left the lab.

“I take it she didn’t become queen due to her winning personality,” said Doctor Vincent under his breath.

Ketteract quickly stepped up to Chelra who took a moment to look the unfamiliar alien up and down carefully. “Why don’t you show me what you’ve got so far? I can’t wait to get started and it looks like we’re on a tight schedule here.”

“Follow me.”

Wesley frowned as he watched the two of them heading closer towards the blast shield at the other side of the lab.

"Three days isn't much time," said Kutznestov.

"It's more than enough time to have this planet and half the quadrant accidentally blown to high heavens," said Vincent and looked after Ketteract who was eagerly following his Xenarth counterpart.

Wesley turned towards the New England doctor. "Had we stayed away the Xenarth may have done all that by themselves and a lot faster."

"Perhaps," he said. "But the way I see it, we've just added fuel to the fire by unleashing Ketteract onto this Omega molecule of his."

"That reminds me of an old Russian saying," said the first officer. "You play with fire and you will get burned."

"That's not a Russian saying," said Mtolu.

The Bear gave the security officer an intense look.

"Or maybe it is."

Wesley and the rest of the landing party joined Ketteract and Chelra, mostly because the idea of leaving the scientist to his own devices around such a powerful force scared them all.

They arrived just in time to witness the massive blast shield being opened to reveal a large tank of swirling cobalt-colored energy within which countless little particles swirled around in a seemingly semi-coordinated dance. It was bright enough to force the landing party to shield their faces for a moment until their eyes had adapted to the brilliant colors, lightening up the lab and dowsing it in dark blue colors.

"My God, it is more beautiful than I imagined," said Ketteract who stared at the light show with unbridled fascination. "You can literally feel the power that courses through it."

"In this state the particles are uncharged and relatively harmless," said Chelra.

"Yes, yes of course. You keep them polarized so that they cannot bind together and unleash their full power. But how do you contain it all? More importantly, how do you facilitate the final stabilization?"

Chelra's mandibles twitched slightly and moved upwards in what looked like a semblance of a smile. Then she walked over to another heavy blast door which loudly slid to the side after she entered a code into a nearby panel.

Ketteract had brought his own, heavily modified tricorder which was at least twice the size of the Starfleet standard issue version. He turned it

on and began scanning the cargo crates which had been stored in the room behind the blast door. "Boronite," he said, his voice not having lost its earlier excitement. "I should have thought of that. It makes perfect sense. Its dense atomic composition makes it the perfect mineral to synthesize and contain the molecule. And this must be the purest form I've ever seen."

Wesley had overheard that. "Are you saying that you cannot produce the molecule without your boronite supply?"

Chelra jerked her head in a nodding fashion. "We were fortunate to have a large source of naturally occurring boronite on Xenarth Prime. This is the only stockpile we were able to save following the transphase."

Ketteract turned to Wesley. "This is excellent news, Commodore. They have more than enough here to get us started on stabilizing the Omega molecule. I'm now more convinced than ever that we will be successful in safely harnessing this awesome power both of the Xenarth and for ourselves as well."

Robert Wesley considered this for a moment. He looked back up towards the eerily beautiful sight of the inert molecules dancing behind the force field, seemingly entirely harmless and then at the impatiently waiting Doctor Ketteract. "Very well. You have three days to make this work, Doctor. I don't have to tell you that I expect you to follow every possible protective measure necessary. This is not an occasion to be cavalier about safety, if you detect anything going amiss, I want you to shut things down straight away."

He looked almost hurt. "I have no intention on sacrificing my life to science just yet, Commodore. If we were all to die who would be left to enshrine my name into history?" he said with a little smirk.

"Right," said Wesley humorlessly. "Commander Zha'Thara will remain here and assist you with whatever you may require."

The molecular scientists shot the Andorian a quick and not so subtle look, wordlessly questioning her competence for the task but apparently deciding it to be better to say nothing further on that subject. "As you wish. But now I really should get started," he said and quickly turned back towards Chelra, eager to discuss his theories with her.

Lexington's science officer stepped up to her captain. "Sir, I may be slightly out of my element here."

"Talana, the difference between you and Ketteract is that I have complete faith in you. You have a couple of days to catch up on the basics and make sure the man doesn't blow up the universe while chasing

immortality," he said and then took a step closer to make sure the Xenarth did not overhear their conversation. "If you think that there is any chance that he and his new friends cannot pull this off without blowing us all to kingdom come, I will need to know straight away because I promise I will go to whatever lengths necessary to stop them."

Nelson Mandela, 2372

“We make it out of this in one piece and you’ve got yourself a date, mister.”

“I’ve already picked the wine.”

Maya nodded sharply. “See you on the flipside, Captain. Donners Out,” she said and terminated the link, causing Terrence Glover’s visage to disappear from the screen. She couldn’t quite keep herself from smirking. True, the man was insufferable at times but in a situation like this, even she couldn’t deny his charm entirely. She glanced back towards the forward viewports and that smirk dropped from her face. The *Nelson Mandela* was just minutes away from making contact with the enemy.

The irony of the situation didn’t escape her. While she didn’t get a chance to pick her crew, *Agamemnon*’s runabout had remained unnamed when she had come aboard and she had promptly christened it after one of her heroes from Earth history. A man of supreme integrity and more importantly, a man of peace. She had envisioned taking this vessel to make first contact with alien nations, to assist those in need or to carry out diplomatic missions.

Instead its first duty would be taking it into battle. She tried hard not to think what the vessel’s namesake would have thought of this if he were still alive.

She turned away from the viewport and looked around the runabout’s cockpit. The vessel was crammed tight with heavily armed security personnel and Marines, most of which showing the kind of stone-faced masks of determination on their faces as one would expect from a group of people trained to fight and kill within moments of insertion into hostile territory.

This made Wayne Daystrom stand out even more. The sole officer wearing a science blue uniform instead of combat fatigues could have

otherwise easily been mistaken as another combatant, considering his large frame. But his face mirrored only anxiety.

Maya stood from her chair behind the Xelation pilot and pushed herself through the crowd of armed men and women to get to her science officer. "Lieutenant, you ready for this?"

He looked up at her with a look of all too obvious insecurity and doubt. When he realized that it was the captain who had posed this question, he did his level best to appear more certain of himself. "Yes, sir," he said after some hesitation.

She didn't buy it for a moment. "Come with me," she said and led him into one of the back compartments for a little bit of privacy. Once there she immediately turned to face him, fully aware that they had little time for prep talks. "Wayne, I need to be able to count on you. I know a combat mission isn't easy and it's probably not something you ever expected having to do—"

He shook his head. "It's not that." Maya shot him a quizzical look. "What then?"

"Going down there to ... destroy Omega. It just feels wrong, sir. I can deal with the fact that we are going into battle, I always accepted that I wouldn't be able to avoid that in Starfleet, but being the attacker and for no other reason than to destroy technology we don't think they should have? Are we absolutely certain we are doing the right thing here, sir?"

The captain considered that for a moment, turning to look towards the many armed men around her. Then she looked him straight in the eye. "If you're hoping to get reassurances from me that we're doing the right thing, I'm sorry to say but I cannot help you."

This had clearly not been the response he had hoped for and his blank expression gave proof to this.

Maya sighed. "Do you think this is what I signed up for? Leading men and women into battle. This goes against everything I believe in but at the same time I know we don't have a choice. We have already seen what the Xenarth can do with Omega and we cannot allow them to try again. The stakes are too high."

"I understand this," he said, nodding meekly.

"Frankly, at this point it doesn't matter if you do or not. I just need you to do your job. Follow your orders and if you cannot do that, tell me now."

He seemed taken aback for a moment by her harsh tone, a strong departure from her usually more emphatic attitude. "I can do that, sir."

She nodded sharply. "Good. What about Elborough and Altoss?" she said, referring to the two other science officers assigned to the teams going after the other generators.

"They know what to do and how to do it."

Maya placed a hand on his shoulder. "For now, focus on what must be done. Leave your doubts and concerns on the runabout. When all this is over, I know of a splendid counselor you can talk to."

He nodded again, a little firmer this time. "Yes, sir."

"Captain."

Amaya turned and saw two security officers approach her. Redmon O'Shaugnessy was a tall Irishman with a mob of red hair and the bulky kind of build preferred among security officers. He was Mer'iab's chief lieutenant. By his side was a slender Vulcan woman, hefting a phaser rifle and a stern expression written across her face.

O'Shaugnessy held up a padd. "Lieutenant Mer'iab would like to speak to you, sir."

Maya turned back to Daystrom. "Get ready, we'll make planetfall soon."

The science officer understood he was dismissed and returned to the cockpit while Maya took the padd off the security officer and activated it to find the Aurelian already expecting her.

"Captain, I would like you to reconsider your role in this mission and remain on the runabout after you land."

She rolled her eyes. "We've been over this, Lieutenant."

"I understand that but I simply do not believe your presence is required on the ground. You can easily assume operational command from the runabout."

Maya shook her head, growing impatient. "It's not the same, Lieutenant."

The security chief looked visibly pained as he spoke again. *"Sir, I ... I could not forgive myself if something were to happen to you down there. It has been brought to my attention that ... perhaps your insistence to lead this away team is due to my past disagreements with Lieutenant Sh'Fane. I'd be happy to ... cede command to Sh'Fane if you prefer and if it would help keeping you away from the enemy."*

Maya couldn't help but smile at that offer. Under other circumstances she may have even called the gesture kind of sweet. "I'm glad my safety is

this important to you, Lieutenant but I didn't join Starfleet to play it safe. And I'm not here because I don't trust you and Sh'Fane. I need you both to lead your respective teams."

Mer'iab knew that the argument was lost. *"I have assigned Lieutenant O'Shaugnessy and Chief Petty Officer V'Ner to shadow your every step. They are two of my best and I would greatly appreciate that, once you take enemy fire, you follow their instructions as closely as possible."*

What went around, came around, she thought. Had she not only just finished giving a similar speech to her science officer? "You'll find me quite able to handle myself, Lieutenant."

He was about to speak up again in protest but she preempted him. "Don't worry, I'll do as you ask."

"Two minutes to orbital bombardment," the pilot called out from the front, causing Maya to glance up momentarily.

"We're out of time," she said, looking back at the Aurelian officer on the padd. "I'll follow my orders and you'll follow yours, Lieutenant. I want you and every single person under your command to come back from this. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, Donners out," she said and closed the channel. She gave the padd back to the Irishman and then looked the two security guards over quickly. "Looks like we're going to get real well acquainted over the next few hours."

"Looking forward to it, sir," said O'Shaugnessy.

"I will be right beside you, sir," said the Vulcan.

"Good times," she said and then turned back towards the cockpit, quickly realizing that her shadows were already trailing her.

"How we doing, Ensign?" she asked the Xelatian pilot.

Space-Wanderer looked up at her. He had long and flowing purple colored hair but perhaps the most fascinating aspect of his people was the golden mask covering every last inch of his face except for a narrow and glowing blue screen where she assumed his eyes were. Maya had encountered a few Xelatians in her time in Starfleet but the only thing she knew for certain about his people was that nobody she had met had ever seen what their actual faces looked like. The secrecy surrounding their appearance was comparable to that of the Breen. She had learned however that in their culture, mature Xelatians were given names appropriate to their profession.

“Clearing cloud cover now,” said Ensign Star-Wanderer. “The fleet is assuming formation to allow *Agamemnon* and *Cuffe* to begin their bombardment.”

She nodded and then switched on the comm that would link her into every shuttle and runabout which was taking part in this operation. “Attention all vessels, make sure you stay in your formation no matter what. And find something to hang on to, this might get rough. Donners out.”

The clouds cleared and Amaya got her first peek at the facility containing the Omega generators. The most domineering feature was the massive tower, easily reaching six-hundred feet into the air. This was what Ket had called the Star Portal. Designed to use Omega to transphase an entire population into another galaxy it had since been re-appropriated by the Xenarth Aggregate to function as a massive Omega canon with a destructive yield Amaya had already witnessed with her own eyes.

Otherwise the facility wasn't much to look at. A few transparent domes and landing platforms dotted an area twice the size of *Agamemnon*. The few weapon emplacements she could see were not a significant threat. The Xenarth had never expected a direct assault on this facility.

She felt the vibrations before she saw the light show.

Then one phaser beam after the next pierced the sky with ear shattering roars, hitting various pre-arranged targets on the surface. The weapons emplacements were the first to go. Then the domes and the landing platforms were taking hits.

Donners watched the spectacle with fascination. Had those phasers been operating on full power, they would have shredded the facility to pieces and potentially destabilized the Omega molecules being generated within. Instead they did exactly what they had intended, making a lot of noise and blowing up a great deal of dust and smoke. A perfect distraction.

The next strike was the one designed to do the real damage and a layman would have been hard pressed to notice the difference. But Donners, with her engineering background immediately spotted the more powerfully modulated phaser blasts, seemingly way off target as they hit nothing but empty land just outside the facility's perimeter.

As those high powered beams drilled themselves deep into the soil, *Cuffe* and *Agamemnon* continued their otherwise less effective assault on the facility itself, ensuring that every last Xenarth inside felt as if the sky was about to drop onto their antennae.

“Best light show I ever saw,” said Chief Holly as he watched the spectacle even as the runabout and the rest of the small-vehicle fleet approached.

The assault force split up into four separate groups already designated as Omega One, Two, Three and Four. Maya would lead the first group, Mer’iab the second and Sh’Fane the third. Their objectives were simple enough on paper. Penetrate the compound, reach the Omega generators, shut them down if possible and destroy them before beating a quick retreat.

Omega Four was lead by *Cuffe’s* security chief Lieutenant Meldin, his job was to locate the boronite storage facility and ensure not a single trace of the material remained after the assault.

If everything went to plan, the four teams would completely neutralize any chance the Xenarth had to generate the Omega molecule ever again.

Maya tried hard not to think of what would happen if they failed as she looked out of the viewport and they headed towards a large cloud of dust which had been blown high into the air following *Agamemnon* drilling a massive hole into the surface of the moon.

“Please tell me you know where you’re going, Wanderer,” she said. “I can’t see a thing.”

“Sensor resolution is clear, sir. There is definitely an opening there.”

“Hope you’re right, kid” said Holly, straining his eyes to be able to discern anything through the cloud of dust they were heading into. “Otherwise this is going to be the shortest assault mission in history.”

The runabout shook slightly as it hit the dust cloud and debris, the absence of a fiery crash however was enough to convince her that a shaft had indeed been opened up.

“We’re below the surface,” said the pilot. “Minus ten meters and descending.”

The dust cloud had disappeared and given way to complete darkness. Maya found the controls for the external spotlights and was quickly greeted by the sight of a precisely drilled vertical tunnel. “Remind me to congratulate the gunners on *Agamemnon* and *Cuffe* when we get back. This is fine work.”

“If their Starfleet careers don’t work out, they’ll always have a future in asteroid mining,” said Star-Wanderer without looking up from his controls.

Maya smirked, realizing for the first time that the man behind the mask had a sense of humor. It was impossible to tell if he had smile on his lips however. Or lips, for that matter.

Far below she could see that the drilling beams had ripped right through the outer walls of the underground compound which now lay obviously exposed which would allow her and her team easy entry into the facility.

So far, so good, she thought but with little illusions that everything in the coming hours would be as easily achieved as their insertion.

Trying to remain positive, she followed her own advice and banned any doubts out of her mind as she faced Chief Holly and the rest of her team. "Everyone, get ready to move out."

Zenith (Iota Crucis IVd), 2372

There was an adage, she believed of human origin, which had been drilled into her ever since she had first joined the Marines a dozen years ago.

No battle plan ever survives first contact with the enemy.

Beatiar Sh'Fane mentally chided herself for not having been more consciously aware of this truism before setting foot onto the Xenarth moon.

"How many?" The captain's voice sounded far away and distorted though her head-mounted comm-unit which was supposed to allow her to be in constant communications even when engaged in battle. But the sturdy headgear, sitting on top of her short white hair like a crown, had not been designed for intense melee combat.

The tall Xenarth solider swung his spear-like weapon at her and the Andorian Marine managed to duck underneath it just in time to avoid being decapitated.

She swiped one leg across the smooth floor, cutting out the legs from underneath the insectoid warrior and sending him crashing down.

With no time for subtleties, she brought her boot down hard into his face, feeling the crushed exoskeleton even through the heel of her footwear.

She swung around and pulled free her pistol-shaped phaser to fire three rounds at point blank range at another Xenarth who had hoped to rush her from behind and taking her by surprise.

The ambush was cut short when the near-invisible phaser blasts struck him in his weakest areas and immediately rendering him unconscious.

"I'd say at least two to three hundred more than we expected," she said in reply and aimed her gun at the next warrior trying to cut her down.

She fired one round before the weapon vibrated slightly in her hand, indicating that the current power cell had been depleted. She uttered a choice Andorian curse and dropped the phaser, knowing full well that she didn't have the time to reload her weapon.

"Jesus," Donners said over the comm. "That's an opposing force almost two thirds larger than we anticipated. Can we still achieve our main objective?"

After her gun had given out, Sh'Fane had quickly picked up one of the spear-rifles dropped by the fallen Xenarth warriors and immediately appreciated its weight and balance. The multipurpose design allowed for it to be used as a long-distance beam weapon, a medium-distance stabbing weapon or use it two-handed like a staff to fight somebody at very close range.

She fired a bolt of cobalt colored energy at an enemy warrior bearing down on one of her people. As Donners' orders of using non-lethal force had been made very clear to her, she aimed low, trying to cut the large insectoid down by taking away his ability to stand upright.

Then she swung around and just in time to deflect a blow with a similar weapon which had been meant for her head. Clearly the Xenarth had not been given the same kind of orders.

"Lieutenant?" the captain said when she hadn't responded.

It was pure luck that the Andorian found herself in a better position to press the attack against her opponent. If all else would have been equal, she doubted that she could have bested a Xenarth who had undoubtedly trained many years with his weapon compared to the few seconds she'd had with it. But as it stood, the Xenarth had overextended his spear ever so slightly, allowing her to pry it free from his hand with a quick twist of her own staff.

She couldn't tell by seeing those large compound eyes if her opponent had realized that he had made a fatal mistake but his feelers jerked up suddenly and just before she brought down the blunt end against his hardened skull in force. She admittedly wasn't completely sure if he would survive the blow but he certainly wouldn't get up again any time soon.

"Lieutenant, are you still there?"

She let go of the spear and looked across the long underground corridor, she found that her team had seemingly prevailed with the floor practically littered with unconscious Xenarth bodies.

She fought hard to catch her breath again. "I'm here, ma'am," she said and then bent over when she relocated her pistol. She promptly ejected the spent power cartridge and replaced it with a fresh one from her belt.

"Are you alright?" said the captain, apparently noticing her haggard tone.

She found Fabrizio Lombardi, her Italian second lieutenant, on the floor picking himself up and she quickly held out a helping hand to pull him back onto his feet. "We ran into a Xenarth patrol," she said. "Nothing we couldn't handle."

It was an understatement to say the least. In fact the two-dozen strong patrol had come out of nowhere and had nearly decimated Sh'Fane's advance team which had been surprised by their agility and speed.

Practically everyone in her combined Marines and Starfleet Security team had come away with at least a few scratches and scrapes. Private Santiago had taken a spear tip into his side and the corpsman had already begun treating his wound.

What their intelligence had failed to anticipate, other than the much more numerous hostile force, was the Xenarth's proclivity for close quarter melee combat, a strategy made even more dangerous when taking into account their tough exoskeleton which protected them like a natural armor, their razor-sharp mandibles and their extra set of hands.

"Casualties?"

"I've got one man down," she said even as she stepped up to her injured private. The corpsman looked at her and gave the company commander a reaffirming nod. "But he'll be alright."

"You didn't answer my earlier question, Lieutenant?"

The Andorian found her rifle which she had lost moments after the Xenarth had nearly overran them. She quickly checked to make sure it was still operational. "My drill instructor back at Command School tried to part onto us young officers the concept of superior numbers and superior firepower in order to win a military engagement. Shock and awe, he called it."

"And we lost the superior numbers element."

"We never really had it in the first place," said Sh'Fane and then consulted a padd which Lombardi had thrust into her waiting hands. "We always knew that. But the plan was based on us being able to quickly eliminate a token force while the majority of Xenarth soldiers would be busy engaging our drones on the upper level."

"If you are right about the number of enemy troops in this facility," said Donners over the comline, "then those drones will be cut down in a matter of minutes after which their main force will move down here and take us on directly."

"That is correct, ma'am," she said, still working on that padd.

"Then what are our chances to get to Omega in time?"

She looked up. "Getting there won't be the problem."

"I'm not prepared for this to turn into a suicide mission, Lieutenant."

The Andorian handed back the padd to her second lieutenant, motioned for her team to get ready to move out again and then powered up the phaser rifle, causing it to whine slightly. "Ma'am," she said, "there may no longer be an alternative."

* * *

She squeezed off another shot and watched with a mixture of satisfaction and trepidation the stunned Xenarth warrior collapse.

The beam had been aimed just below where a human's left collarbone would have been and had been powerful enough to penetrate the thick exoskeleton and deliver a shock to his system he wasn't likely to recover from quickly. She was glad to find that Queen Ket's intel had remained accurate and now gave them the kind of edge they needed if they held out any hope in making this mission a success.

She turned to look at the rest of her team which consisted of herself, Chief Holly, security officers O'Shaugnessy and V'Ner, Wayne Daystrom plus another well armed six Marines and another six security specialists.

Like in the three other teams making up Operation Pandora, hers was the scouting party, the most crucial element of the team, tasked with locating the Omega generator and shutting it down for good. The rest of her fifty-man assault force was to keep their flanks and escape routes clear, ensure that they would not be ambushed and most importantly, keep any Xenarth reinforcements who had been sent to stop them at bay.

The plan had sounded solid when Mer'iab and Sh'Fane had drawn it up initially but already Maya realized that things were beginning to fall apart, most notably due to a much larger than expected hostile force.

"Chief," she said after they had cleared another room which according to their scans stood between them and the Omega generator. "How are we doing?"

The veteran senior-NCO already had his padd out to provide an update. Maya had initially resisted the notion of having the quartermaster join the assault, having fallen into the ageism trap of falsely believing that the veteran had too many years on him to be part of a strike team. But Holly had been quite insistent after he had learned that she'd chosen to lead the operation herself, claiming that his experience would be invaluable to her. She had quickly found that he had not exaggerated in the least. His reflexes were as sharp as those of a man half his age and he was probably a better shot with the phaser rifle than any of the security officers or Marines. But most significantly, the Starfleet veteran had an undeniable command presence which was not only universally respected by the men, Maya felt it helped motivate them as well.

"We're encountering heavy resistance on all fronts. The drones upstairs are being taken apart and the Xenarth main force is beginning to shift to the lower levels. Clearly they know we're here," he said as he looked over the data streaming into the handheld device before he focused on her. "Sh'Fane was right, we have a lot less time than we anticipated. "

"How much time do you think?"

"Hard to say. I suppose it depends on how many casualties you are comfortable with."

She frowned at that. "None, Chief."

His eyes practically bore themselves into hers, giving the captain a stone-cold look and trying to make her understand that that option was simply no longer realistic.

But she chose to ignore it and instead turned to her science officer. "Wayne?"

He quickly stepped up. "Omega-Two and Three have made contact with the generators and have commenced the shut down process."

That was some good news at least. "What are the chances that they can do this within the time frame we need to get this done?"

"I think Altoss has a good handle on it," said Daystrom, referring to the Efrosian science officer who had been assigned to Sh'Fane's team in order to shut down the generator.

"What about Omega-Two?"

Daystrom seemed a lot less sure on that one. "They've also made contact but Elborough is having some difficulties."

"Damn," said Maya. "Was she the right choice?"

He nodded. "She's the best molecular science specialist on board and she understands the basics of Omega just fine. She's just never quite expected to having to do this under these kind of conditions."

"None of us did, Wayne," she said. "Talk her through it if that's what she needs. Just get it done."

He nodded sharply.

"Captain, Lieutenant Meldin reports that his team has located one of the three boronite repositories and they are clearing it now," said Chief Holly after getting the latest update through the padd.

"That means everybody is on schedule but us," she said and then quickly turned to head down the corridor. "Let's double time it, people."

But before she had even made one step, another Xenarth patrol stepped into their path at the far side of the large laboratory they had just cleared. Maya saw them too late. O'Shaugnessy and V'Ner, who true to Mer'iab's promise had acted like her shadow ever since setting foot into the facility, did not.

"Get down," the tall Irishman shouted and pushed the captain roughly to the side.

The firefight was over in seconds.

The three Xenarth soldiers fired their spear-like rifles only a nano-second before the two security guards could respond in kind. Then the remaining team members opened fire, immediately reducing the insectoid patrol to unconscious husks.

"Man down," cried Holly.

It took Maya a second to realize that it had been the red-haired security man who had taken a hit. One which had been meant for her. Holly and the corpsman were at his side in an instant while the Vulcan moved closer to Donners now that her fellow protector was down.

"Is he alright?" Maya wanted to know straight away.

"I'm fine, sir," he said quickly after the two men had helped him sit up against the wall, the corpsman already tending to his wound. "Just give me a few stims and I'll be fine," he added but Maya was not fooled by the pain he was clearly trying to hide.

The corpsman, a dark-haired Marine, shook his head slightly. "Damn weapon seems to have had an anticoagulant," he said after referring to his tricorder. "I won't be able to stop the bleeding here. He needs a sickbay."

Maya turned to her senior NCO. "Chief, get two men to take him back to the runabout."

"Captain," said the injured security officer and then shortly gritting his teeth from the pain. "You can't afford losing three men now, not if we're already so vastly outnumbered. Not if we're already running out of time."

She shook her head. "This is not the time to play hero, Redmond. You need treatment."

"Just get me a thick bandage and something for the pain and I'll be fine, sir."

She glanced at Holly who seemed to nod along in agreement. Maya didn't like this one bit but couldn't ignore the fact that he was right. The math simply didn't add up and everybody knew it.

Despite her better judgment she turned towards the corpsman. "Do it." And then to her injured bodyguard: "You let me know the moment this gets worse, that's an order."

"Yes, sir."

Within moments the corpsman had bandaged the wound and given him enough stimulants and painkillers to allow him to stand up on his own. Maya admired his professionalism when he once again grabbed his phaser rifle and took her side, giving her a short nod to indicate that he was just fine.

She knew that not to be the case.

"Alright, folks, that's all the rest you gonna get for a while. The generator is just three hundred meters ahead. Watch your sectors but keep moving, we can't afford to stop again until we reach our primary target," said Holly, already leading by example as he headed out towards where they so desperately needed to get to.

* * *

When A.J. Elborough had joined Starfleet, less than five years ago, and graduated the Academy with a specialty in molecular physics and chemistry she had expected to spend the majority of her days sitting in a lab and studying the microscopic details of the smallest particles known to exist. And while this hadn't sounded particularly exciting to her friends and family, it was exactly that kind of methodical study she aspired to. To learn more about how the universe worked from the safety and comfort of a precisely controlled environment.

"Get down!"

Lieutenant Chi Ling Yuen reached the young science officer just in time to push her down onto the floor before the super-charged energy beam could have separated her head from her shoulders.

The following barrage of phaser fire took out the Xenarth soldier who had been able to get into the Omega chamber undetected, eight crimson-colored lances immediately causing his unconscious body to clutter to the floor.

"Are you alright?" asked the Chinese security officer after he was certain the threat had been neutralized.

"I ... I think so," she said as she brushed her damp blonde hair which had come loose from her ponytail out of her face. "Thanks."

"It's what I'm here for," he said with a smile.

She couldn't quite help herself and returned it. In truth this wasn't the first time she had noticed the muscular security officer with the infectious smile. She had seen him on *Agamemnon* a few times and even though they hadn't spoken much more than a couple of words before this away mission, she had found him immediately likeable. And that smile almost made her forget that she had nearly gotten her head shot off.

He helped her back onto her feet.

"This ... this is not what signed up for," she said as she picked up her tricorder which had slipped out of her hand when the shooting had started.

"Ensign, how far along are we with getting this thing shut down?"

Elborough didn't need to turn to find who had spoken. His high-pitched, nearly screechy voice was quite distinct and truth be told, it gave her a headache. Or rather was making the one she had worse. The imposing security chief didn't seem to care much, judging by the way he had yelled at her from the moment they had breached the Omega chamber just a few minutes earlier.

She'd barely had the chance to fully investigate the snow-globe like device which stood a good ten meters tall at the far end of the room and pulsed with a steady blue glow.

"I'm ... I'm not sure," she said as she pointed the tricorder at the device.

"Not good enough," Mer'iab said. "We have reports that hostile forces are far more significant than we anticipated and that their main force is heading our way as we speak. We don't have time for you not being sure."

Elborough aimed an incredulous look at the avian, her mouth hanging open at the news that they were apparently about to be overrun.

"Ensign," he repeated after clearly not being happy with her lack of action.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and she turned to find Yuen.

"It's alright, A.J., we'll be here to protect you. Just do your job."

She nodded slowly. Somewhere in the back of her mind she couldn't stop thinking of handsome Yuen. And also, surprisingly reassuring Yuen. She wondered when he had learned her name. Then she realized how insignificant and inappropriate all those thoughts were given their current situation.

She focused on the Omega generator again before glancing down at the readouts of her tricorder. Her excitement of learning about this massively powerful particle had long since passed, ever since she had realized that it would be her job to destroy it and that in the process she may very well lose her own life.

"It's ... it's not yet fully formed," she said as she analyzed the data. "We can still shut it down by altering the main power flow to the resonance chamber."

"Find it and pull the plug," Mer'iab screeched.

She shook her head. "It's not that simple, sir," she said. "Just cutting power could cause a massive feedback loop. I need to find the exact frequency and then slowly re-modulate it to reverse the molecular synthesis which will stop the individual atoms to bond with—"

"Ensign, stow the science talk and get it done."

"Yes, sir."

Yuen smiled at her. "You'll be alright."

She nodded and went to work.

But as much as she tried to focus on what needed to be done, she couldn't entirely stop overhearing the security chief, Yuen and the rest of the team discussing their seemingly dire situation.

"It's not good, sir," said one of the security officers after being prompted for a report by Mer'iab. "All teams are reporting heavy enemy contact. And they clearly know what we're after. Lansing is reporting that they are striking his position the hardest. He's already taken casualties. It's only a matter of time before they're overrun."

"Have him regroup here along with Ha'kar's men. Have them set up emergency triage in this room, we've got enough space," the senior

lieutenant said after apparently having consulted a schematic of the facility.”

The officer he had been talking to acknowledged sharply and then set out to carry out his orders.

“It’s not giving us a lot of time,” she heard Yuen say. He was speaking softly and she was grateful for this but sound traveled easily in the large chamber.

“I know.”

She heard their footsteps approaching.

“Ensign, have you found that frequency of yours yet,” Mer’iab said before he had even reached her. “We’re running out of time.”

“I think so but ... but I need to run some more tests before I can be sure.”

“What part of running out of time did you not comprehend?”

She shot him a fiery look. “Listen, I can’t work like this, okay? I know we’re in a tough spot and that all these lives depend on my being able to shut this down but honestly that’s not the kind of pressure I need.” She stopped herself to take a deep breath, surprised by the steel and anger in her own voice. The look in the avian’s eyes was making her shudder. “Sir,” she added quickly as if it could excuse her inappropriate outburst.

Before the security chief could put her back into her place, Yuen took a small step forward, subtly putting himself in between the two officers. He gave Elborough a reassuring look. “We have another option, don’t we?” he said and glanced towards two security guards who had taken a seat close by, their sole task to carry transporter pattern enhancers strapped to their backs. “We can beam the molecules onto *Cuffe’s* resonance chamber.”

She shook her head. “I just checked in with Commander N’Saba. They’re not ready yet. We try to beam into the resonance chamber now and we risk blowing up the *Cuffe*, not to mention half the quadrant.”

“Tell us what you need,” he said.

She aimed a grateful look at the junior lieutenant. “A moment of peace and quiet would probably –”

“Wounded incoming!”

An entire group of Starfleet security officers and Marines entered the chamber. Their uniforms torn and dirty and most of them were bleeding or badly scratched and bruised. Some had to be carried, some weren’t even conscious anymore.

Yuen quickly gestured toward the far corner where they had begun to set up their temporary triage but the two medics looked as if they were going to be woefully underequipped to deal with number of injuries flooding in.

Mer'iab swiftly found the highest-ranking officer in the group, a stoic Andorian Marine who refused to get treatment before his men had been seen too. "Sergeant, what happened?"

He needed a moment to collect his thoughts. "Our position was overrun, sir. It looks like they threw everything they had at us. We cut them down one after the next but they just kept coming," he paused for a moment, unwilling to loose himself. "They took us on man-to-man, even unarmed if they had to," he said and looked the lieutenant square in the eye. "They are vicious fighters, sir. They don't go down easy."

"How much time do we have until they get here?" asked Yuen.

"I'm not sure. Ha'kar and his team were covering our retreat. It looked as if they were pushing the Xenarth back again but that won't last. They'll try again with larger numbers. And sir, the next time there won't be any stopping them."

The avian took the news in stride and gave the Marine a nod. "Have them see to your injuries," he said. "The sooner you're fixed up again the sooner you can rejoin the fray."

The Andorian responded with a curt nod and then joined the rest of his men.

Mer'iab found Elborough again who to his displeasure was watching the injured instead of focusing on the generator and the ominously pulsating super-molecules contained within as they steadily bonded with each other in an effort to become the deadly and dangerous Omega molecule.

"Ensign."

"I know, I know," she barked and then quickly turned away from the agitated Aurelian. "Work faster or we're all going to die," she mumbled under her breath. "I got the message."

Terrence couldn't quite remember ever having seen his bridge quite this busy. Most of the aft stations were double or even triple manned with men and women industriously going back and forth, coming and going, passing on pads and information in a seemingly endless stream.

His usually spacious bridge felt packed and the noise level was making it difficult for him to focus on the main screen where he studied with great apprehension a cutaway schematic of the underground Omega facility far below. Blue dots indicated their people while red dots were the enemy. At present there were far too many red dots, swarming all around the scattering blue ones.

"Sir, Meldin reports his team has located and destroyed all traces of boronite in the facility," said Amanis Bheto from operations, her sharp voice cutting through the background noise on the bridge.

He nodded in acknowledgement even if she couldn't see that from where she was sitting. "Finally some good news," he said and focused in on the quadrant of the map where his security chief had led his team to destroy the one substance which was essential in synthesizing the Omega molecule. "Now we just have to worry about the generators. Tell Meldin to have his people assist the other teams to hold off the Xenarth."

"No need," she said. "Donners has already given the order."

He couldn't help himself but smirk. There had been a reason the rookie captain had practically demanded to be part of Operation Pandora's Box on the ground. She had wanted to be close to the pulse and lead it from the front. She certainly was doing just that.

The Andorian ops officer turned in her chair to make eye contact with her commanding officer. "Sir, Meldin is reporting three fatalities."

Terrence Glover nodded. The notion that he wouldn't lose people on this mission had been an unrealistic fantasy. It certainly hadn't been the first time he had lost people under his command and he knew it wouldn't

be the last. Right now he had no time to mourn. "Tell him to bring them back onboard, Commander. We're not leaving anyone behind."

"Aye, sir."

Kojo walked up on him, studying a padd. "It's not looking good down there," she said.

"I've got eyes, Nandali, I can see that."

She went on as if he hadn't spoken. "Omega-Three has seventy percent of the molecules destroyed but team one and two are behind schedule and judging by the enemy troop movements they may not have enough time to complete the shut down procedures, scuttle the generators and make a clean exit."

"Leave it to the Marines to get things done right, huh?" he said. "Get hold of Lieutenant Sh'Fane and let her know to speed things up any way she can and then have her people support the other teams holding back the Xenarth. That should buy them some time."

The striking Kriosian warrior woman glanced up from her padd. "Donners is not going to like you armchair quarterbacking this."

He aimed an amused look at her. "Armchair quarterbacking? Really?"

She looked momentarily confused. "Is that ... not the right term?"

"I just didn't know you knew football."

"What's football?" she said with a straight face.

"Relay the message, Commander," he said. "She can get mad at me when she comes back out of this alive."

She nodded with a faint smirk on her lips.

"Captain, I have the *Agamemnon* hailing," said one of the three officers currently manning the tactical station.

"Put them through," Glover barked.

An inset picture at the bottom of the screen showed the blue-skinned Bolian presently in command of the other starship while its captain was battling on the surface. The man's brow was furled into thick worry lines and Glover couldn't blame him for it. He could hardly hear him when he spoke over the noise all around him but the few words he did catch were not promising at all.

"Can I have some quite please?" he said.

Absolutely nobody on the bridge seemed to have been listening.

"Everybody shut up for one minute," he barked, his booming voice momentarily freezing everyone to the spot. "Better," he continued and

looked back at Texx who looked slightly stunned himself. "Commander, you were giving me more bad news?"

He nodded slowly. *"We've detected a vessel entering orbit around the moon."*

That captured everyone's attention on Cuffe's bridge. Terrence massaged his temples, fighting the urge to shout at somebody for not having been told this already. "More Xenarth reinforcements?"

Texx shook his head. *"It's not Xenarth. The design doesn't match anything in our database but we've tracked its course and it seems to have originated from Hugh's vessels last known position. It looks like a smaller version of his ship. A shuttle, most likely."*

"Son of a bitch is making a move," said Glover, instantly regretting the fact that they had not kept closer watch on the liberated Borg who had already made their designs for the Omega particle unmistakably clear. After their ship had been torn apart, he and Donners had foolishly written them off as a potential threat. It was a mistake that was going to cost them now. "Please tell me we can intercept."

But the apprehensive look on the Bolian's face made his answer obvious even before he opened his mouth. *"We're out of position to get to them before they can enter orbit."*

Terrence glanced towards Jean Hajar but his helmswoman was already shaking her head. "I've got them on sensors. They're entering orbit on the far side of the moon. We have no chance to intercept in time," she said and then turned to look at him with an apologetic look on her face.

He uttered a heavy sigh. "Somebody get a hold of Donners and let her know that her life just got a whole lot more complicated. And I want four sets of eyes on the goddamned sensors twenty-four seven. No more surprises, people."

Zenith, 2372

"I'm not willing to go down that route just yet."

Maya had temporarily retreated to a quiet corner of the Omega generator room, not far from where they had set up their triage area, to touch base with Glover on *Cuffe*.

"I have about twenty very smart people up here, watching and analyzing every single move the Xenarth on the ground are making and every one of them agrees that we have to start pressing them harder or your teams will not last long enough to complete the mission."

Not to far from where she stood, she found Chief Holly appraising her through his intense eyes, a concerned frown on his face made it clear to her that he was of similar conviction. In fact it had been the Chief who had made the suggestion to switch to a more aggressive tactic first.

She looked back at the padd which provided her the exact same data and troop movements that Glover and his officers were seeing from orbit. There were far too many red dots compared to their blue ones. "Meldin's people have successfully reinforced the other teams and are holding the main Xenarth force at bay for now," she said. "Some of the drones of the initial assault have survived and we're getting them to outflank the Xenarth."

"It's not enough Maya, and you know it. In fact the way things are going, I'm not even sure if enacting lethal force at this point is going to give us enough time."

"Then why are we having this discussion?" she said angrily. "What's the difference?"

His voice responded with similar steel. *"The difference is losing a handful of people or dozens."*

She had no immediate response to that and decided to change track. "How much time do I have until Hugh makes planetfall?"

"We just lost him on sensors so he'll have to be close," he said. Glover continued in a softer tone. "Listen to me, Maya, Hugh wasn't exactly a happy Borg the last time we ran into him and I don't know how many friends he's bringing to the party. We have to assume his main goal is to secure Omega for himself."

"I'm not going to let that happen."

"My point is, the stun setting may work on the Xenarth but it won't do you much good against shielded Borg drones. Even if they're no longer part of the collective."

"I know."

"Give the goddamn order or I will."

"It's my mission and my call," she shot back. "I'm the one down here putting my life on the line."

"It's not just your life, Maya."

"Keep me updated on any changes," she said coolly. "Donners out," she added and tapped her combadge to close the channel.

Not a moment after she had finished up with Terrence, Holly approached her. "That did not look like a pleasant conversation."

A single glance was all Maya needed to confirm that theory.

"So I take it we continue as is for now?"

She considered the veteran Starfleet NCO for a moment. He hadn't questioned her orders, had actively supported them in front of the men even after he had suggested they abandon their non-lethal tactics, making it obvious that he was firmly in Glover's camp on this. But it was clear to her that he was too loyal to his captain to even entertain the thought of siding against her on this issue.

"I'm just not ready to give the order to kill these people, Chief," she said. "No matter how we want to justify it, we're the invaders. We're the ones who came here looking for a fight. The Xenarth are just defending what is theirs."

"What is theirs could end up destroying half the galaxy."

"Perhaps," she said. "But do you think the grunts know that?" she added and shook her head. "There is something very wrong about this picture and I'm not going to be the one punishing Xenarth rank and file for the mistakes of their government."

"One could argue that that's precisely the definition of war."

"Exactly. And we're not at war. Once all this is over I still want to try and open a dialogue with these people and that's going to be a lot more difficult if we start killing them now."

Holly nodded even though he couldn't entirely hide the doubt in his eyes. "I have a suggestion to make which may buy us a little extra time."

"I'm all ears."

"We've got more than enough tri-cobalt to obliterate half a dozen Omega generators," he said, referring to the explosives they had brought to scuttle the generators once they had successfully destroyed the volatile molecules within. He gently asked for the padd Donners was still holding and she quickly handed it over. He manipulated the device so it displayed a schematic of their current surroundings and then pointed at the main corridor which led into the generator room and from which most of the Xenarth attacks had originated from. "We could set up some of the explosives in this passageway, which I would imagine would slow down any Xenarth force trying to reach us significantly."

Maya smiled. "Best idea I've heard all day," she said. "Get on that, Chief, will you?"

He gave her a firm nod and headed out.

Donners' next stop was the reason they were here in the first place, the massive, snow-globe like Omega generator at which Daystrom and a couple of technicians were currently working on. The sooner they managed to shut the device down and neutralize the molecules, the sooner they could pull back out.

She found her science chief deeply involved in a comm. channel conversation. "Sounds to me like you've got the right frequency, what's the molecular integrity look like now?"

"I'd say around sixty-seven, sixty-eight percent."

"Good, good," he said. "That should give you enough time. Now, remember the power drain has to remain constant but should not exceed point zero zero two megahertz to allow the molecule to naturally destabilize. And keep an eye on the phase variance."

"Okay, I think we're good. Integrity is now at a negative rate, point two percent per minute."

"We need to find a way to get that up."

Overhearing their conversation, Maya was pleased to find that Elborough was now well underway to have her reactor shut down. With the news that Sh'Fane and Altoss had already neutralized the third device,

she felt renewed hope that they were back on schedule to complete the mission.

Just before she was about to turn around and leave her science officer to do his job she froze, suddenly realizing a painful truth. While Daystrom was talking the younger officer through the process step-by-step, he was not actually tending to the generator in this room, instead keeping his eyes focused on a data padd and taping away as he spoke to Elborough.

The generator in the background was pulsating with barely contained power just as intensely as it had the moment they had arrived.

"Lieutenant," she said as she stepped closer.

The young officer looked up.

"Progress report."

"Uh, yes, sir," he said, clearly slightly taken aback by her sharp tone. "Team Three has successfully shut down their generator. I expect the second generator to be shut down within the next twenty minutes at this rate."

She gave him a short nod. "How about this one?" she said, looking at the throbbing device behind him.

He turned and then stared at it as if he had seen it there for the first time.

"Wayne, what's going on?" said a clearly concerned Elborough.

Donners stepped next to the man. "Ensign, this is the captain. It sounds to me you've got things in hand. I need you to close the channel and proceed on your own."

"Yes ... yes, of course, sir," she said. "Elborough out."

"She needs my help," he said without really taking his eyes of the generator he was supposed to be tending to.

"Never mind, Elborough, what's happening to this one. How close are we to shutting it down?" she said, keeping her eyes peeled on the science officer.

"I'm not sure ... I can, sir."

Maya felt a sudden headache coming on. She didn't need this. Not now. She had been so busy focusing on the assault and their quickly diminishing chances of mission success that she had entirely neglected on checking on Daystrom's progress. Considering his early and vocal protests in regard to this mission, she mentally berated herself now for this grave oversight. "What do you mean?"

He looked at her gingerly. "Molecular integrity is already well passed eighty-eight percent and they are beginning to bond at an ever accelerating rate," he said. "Captain, it's amazing and a far more controlled synthesis than we ever expected. When I first ran my simulations back at the Academy I never anticipated such a smooth bonding process even in my most optimistic predictions. It's almost as if they want to come together naturally. A billion pieces, desperate to form a whole."

"Wayne—"

"Captain, listen," he said, sounding almost euphoric now. "This isn't at all what we thought it be. Omega is supposed to be an artificial construct, never before observed in nature. But what I'm seeing here, it's almost as if its ... well, intelligent."

She shot the pulsating mass a suspicious look. "You're telling me these particles are alive?"

He shook his head quickly. "No, not in the traditional sense. But they behave in such a perfect pattern, it's as if they are coming together naturally and not artificially. It's as if the Xenarth inadvertently discovered a missing link in the fabric of the universe."

"This all sounds very interesting but I don't see how—"

"It's a natural phenomenon, Captain. We might very well be looking at not just a missing link but *the* missing link. This could be the force that created our galaxy. Strike that, the universe. This could be the intelligence behind everything we know."

Maya's head was beginning to spin, not having expected the sudden introduction of metaphysics and existential philosophy while in the middle of an intricate assault mission. Then she remembered the hundreds of lives she had placed into harm's way and which would depend on the decisions she'd make over the next few minutes. "How long to shut it all down, Lieutenant."

He aimed an incredulous look at her. "Captain, I don't think you understand—"

"Maybe I don't, but what I do understand is that we've come here to destroy Omega before it has a chance to destroy us. And if we can't do that within the next few minutes, we're all going to die on this rock," she said and her hand actually moved towards her phaser. "Don't lose focus on the mission now, Wayne. I beg you."

His eyes grew wider when he realized the veiled threat in her tone and movements. Clearly he didn't expect her to become aggressive, in the

short time he had known her she had never given him the reason that she'd be capable of it. But her entire body language had changed now. He actual took a step backwards and towards the generator, almost as if trying to protect it from her growing fury. "If ... if you discovered a new form of life ... would you simply kill it? Would you not have a moral responsibility to preserve it no matter what?"

"You just told me that this is not a life-form," she nearly barked.

A few security officers and Marines nearby now turned their way and closed in, Chief Holly first among them, now that the captain was clearly becoming agitated by the science officer's growing defiance.

He shook his head. "It isn't. Not really. It's ... it's more like the beginning of all life."

Maya took a deep breath, for the first time realizing that her frustration had gotten the better of her. "The beginning or the end, Wayne?"

"Sir?"

She took a quick look around the room and all the faces now focused on the confrontation between her and Daystrom. Then she turned back to look the man square in the eye. "I'm no scientist but tell me this, if Omega was truly behind the Big Bang, how can we possibly know that it won't do so again? We're looking at a massively powerful force here which is inherently unstable and according to you may have had the power to start all life. By that definition, does it not have the power to end all life as well? Ask yourself a simple question. Do you want to be responsible for that? For starting another Big Bang?"

Daystrom looked momentarily mystified as if he hadn't considered that possibility at all. No doubt thoughts of his great-grandfather's fanatical obsession which had driven him to insanity now crossed his mind. "Captain, I don't—"

"Incoming."

Maya whipped around, her phaser in hand before she had completed the turn, expecting a horde of Xenarth soldiers to come flooding into the chamber. Instead she saw something far worse.

Borg.

* * *

Hugh and his fifteen-man strong landing party materialized in a swirl of green energy, their transporter clearly able to overcome the Omega radiation which had not allowed the Starfleet assault teams to enter the facility in the same manner.

The former drones, covered from head to toe in dark cybernetic implants, wires and tubes, immediately took on defensive postures, raising their arms and their wrist mounted weapons at the startled Starfleet officers and Marines in the room.

The hesitation didn't last long. Seconds after the Borg party had fully materialized, every single rifle was promptly pointed at the new threat. Maya already knew that it wasn't going to be enough. While never having faced the Borg before in ground combat, she knew enough that this was not a battle she could afford. Not with a horde of Xenarth soldiers just around the corner, trying to wipe them out before they completed their mission.

"Hold you fire," she said and stepped forward, Master Chief Holly and Chief V'Ner immediately flanking her. She shot Hugh a wide smile. Charm had worked on Glover, maybe it could work on a former Borg drone. "Nice of you to drop by. Next time I'd appreciate a bit of a heads-up."

Hugh and his right-hand man, Goval, shifted their arms to draw a bead on the starship captain which in turn caused a nervous reaction by the assembled Starfleet team.

Maya did the opposite. She holstered her phaser and raised her arms. "You wouldn't shoot an unarmed woman now, would you?"

"Captain, we don't have the time for this," Holly whispered. "The Xenarth are almost on top of us."

She ignored the well-founded advice for now and much to his chagrin took another small step towards the Borg. "We've covered this already, remember? We're not enemies here."

The tactic seemed to work. Hugh lowered his arm.

Goval and the others did not.

"You plan to destroy Particle 010. We will not allow this," said Hugh's chief lieutenant.

"And you're willing to go through all of us to get it?" she said. "What about the Xenarth. Would you risk for it to fall into the hands of a race clearly not prepared for this kind of power?"

"The Xenarth are irrelevant," Goval said. "And so are you."

That caused another murmur to go through the Starfleet teams. Now even the injured at the triage point were trying to get up, ready to face what seemed like an inevitable showdown with the Borg. Every Starfleet officer's worst nightmare.

"You notice how you started sounding just like your brothers in the collective? Is this all it takes to revert you back to being a mindless drone?" said Maya, her voice taking on an edge.

It only made Goval angry. "You will not be able to stop us by talking us down, human. Particle 010 will be ours."

But Maya kept her eyes on Hugh, realizing that he had not said a single word yet, choosing instead to silently watch and appraise. She couldn't be certain if it was because he was considering what she was saying or perhaps to figure out the best assault strategy while surrounded by Starfleet troops.

Maya had no illusions. If it came to a fight now, they'd lose before the smoke would get a chance to settle. Taking down the Borg would be difficult enough, but even if they survived this, they wouldn't the Xenarth onslaught in their weakened state.

"It does not have to be like this," Hugh finally said.

Both Maya and Goval glanced at the Borg leader, not fully understanding what he had meant by this.

Then he focused on Donners. "If you just step aside and allow us to take what we came for, we will remove it from this place and ensure the Xenarth will never be able to attempt to synthesize it again. We will take it far away from here."

It was a damn good argument, Maya had to agree. Just let the Borg have it and be done with it. And it would certainly solve one of her problems. Her mission would be over and she could get her people out of harm's way. And it wasn't as if these were real Borg, who'd use Omega against innocents. Hugh, from all she had heard and read about him, was a conscientious individual, able to reason and use his power responsibly.

She was tempted to give in. All she had to do was to stand down and let Hugh's Borg take what they wanted and this nightmare would be over.

Patience was clearly not one of Goval's virtues. He took another step forward. "You will comply."

Maya turned to look at Chief Holly just behind her. He still had his rifle up but he was looking at her, almost as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. He shook his head marginally.

Then she spotted Wayne Daystrom, also holding a phaser now. The man had been her most vocal advocate for the preservation of the Omega molecule. He took a step towards her when he noticed her eyes on him. "This ... this is not right," he said, his voice small and without real confidence.

"You will comply, now."

The Borg's firm voice seemed to change something in the science officer. His expression grew more tense and his voice firmer. He clutched his weapon tightly. "Captain, we can't let them have it. I'd rather see it destroyed."

"Enough talk," the former Borg drone said and moved forward.

"Goval," said Hugh.

"No," he shot back, aiming a quick glance at his leader. "Every second we talk we further delay the inevitable. Particle 010 must be ours. You know that."

When Goval turned back around, he did so firing.

"Captain, watch out," Chief Holly cried and pushed her down just in time to avoid being struck by the ugly green bolt of angry energy.

Starfleet and Marines did not hesitate after seeing the Borg taking a potshot at their captain.

In the opening moments of the firefight, two former Borg drones were immediately cut down, one Marine was hit by the Borg returning fire and three Starfleet officers went down with injuries. After the initial exchange of weapon's fire, everyone scrambled, using the many bulky computer consoles and equipment crates littered throughout the chamber for cover.

"Watch you fire, watch your fire," a panicked Daystrom shouted from the top of his lungs as he hid behind a console near to the Omega generator. "If you hit the containment field we're all dead."

Thankfully both the Starfleet team and Hugh's Borg seemed to understand this and limited their fire, shooting only when there was no chance of hitting the one thing they were fighting for.

Maya had found cover behind a large crate and listened intently. She heard the telltale sounds of phaser burst and disruptor blasts all around her. She recalled her ground combat training. Rule number one: Avoid at all costs getting into a ground combat situation.

She almost laughed out loud at the thought. Long passed that.

Another rule that training officers had tried to drill into cadets at the Academy was to listen carefully. If you couldn't avoid getting into a battle, good chances were you'd sit behind some sort of cover without being able to see who is firing and in what direction. The last thing you wanted to do was to pop out at the most inopportune moment and be rewarded with a phaser blast right into your face.

A mistake many impatient young Starfleet officers made, too eager to try and hit an enemy instead of considering tactical soundness.

Phaser blast. Disruptor. Phaser. Disruptor. Disruptor. Phaser. Disruptor.

There was almost a beautiful harmony to this battle for life and death. And very soon it became predictable.

She waited for the inevitable lull just after another set of phaser blasts had been unleashed. Then she made her move, coming up from behind cover and immediately noticed the sole Borg trying to return fire on the Starfleet position.

Maya held her breath, steadying her type-III phaser against her right shoulder and gently depressed the firing stub. Her aim was true and her enemy stumbled backwards. Three more phaser blast caught the now unprotected Borg and slung him to the floor, hopefully unconscious.

Chief Holly used the distraction to make his way to Donners' position, firing his rifle as he went to discourage somebody trying to take him down as he stepped into the open.

Maya was back behind cover when he joined her. "Thanks for that earlier."

He simply nodded before peeking up to once again return fire. When he came back down, he aimed a serious look at her. "We cannot keep this up."

"Casualties?"

"Beck is down, not sure yet how bad," he said, referring to the Marine who had taken a blast right to the chest when the shooting had started.

"Damn it."

"It's worse than that," he said. "Last we checked the Xenarth were less than ten minutes away from making their —"

The veteran NCO didn't get to finish his sentence. As it turned out, ten minutes had been a far too optimistic an estimate. The Xenarth were

coming right that moment, streaming into the chamber in full force, determined to take back what was theirs.

Hugh's men and the Starfleet contingent were not prepared to face a third party, too busy trying to take on each other. The Xenarth used their spear-like weapons to impale three unlucky Borg near the main entrance and another Starfleet officer before they could scramble out of the way.

Maya watched in horror from her position. There were at least two dozen insectoid warriors storming the chamber and probably a few more right behind them. "Fall back, fall back," she shouted to her people nearest to the entrance and fired at the incoming horde. Then she whipped around to look at the Chief. "Do we still have the option to detonate that hallway?"

He shook his head sharply. "Didn't get the chance to set up the detonator."

She frowned and returned to firing her weapon. The effect was negligible even when Holly and a number of other Starfleet team members joined in. Their phasers, set on heavy stun, caused most of the Xenarth streaming in to stumble, some fell and others seemed to lose consciousness but many did not. And their numbers simply refused to go down. For every soldier they managed to take out of the fight, two more appeared.

Matters were made worse by the fact the battle had turned into a massive free-for-all. Starfleet fighting the Xenarth, Xenarth fighting Borg, Borg fighting Starfleet, everyone and anyone was apparently fair game now.

The only constant so far was that everybody was going out of their way to keep the battle as far away from the pulsating Omega generator as possible, apparently fully cognizant of the immense power it could unleash if an errant blast would take out the protective containment shielding.

Holly shook his head and Maya understood why. This was not going to end well. At this pace both Starfleet and Hugh's people would eventually get worn down by the relentless Xenarth push, especially if they continued to fight each other.

"You will not have 010," cried Goval, his modulated voice mirroring anger and frustration. Maya watched with disbelief as he left his cover, firing relentlessly at the incoming Xenarth without a thought to his own safety.

"Goval, no!" shouted Hugh.

But the former drone was determined to stop the insectoids dead in their track, no matter the cost. "Secure 010, I'll hold them off."

And he did an admirable job at that. Blasting the enemy soldiers with almost perfect accuracy, taking them down with one headshot after the next, before firing point blank as he got closer and closer. He deftly deflected the spears looking to impale him, using his superior strength to rip one right out of a surprised Xenarth hands, before using that same weapon to slash and stab at the horde bearing down on him.

But the plan was flawed. There were simply too many for one man, even a former Borg drone, to battle head on. Before long he was overwhelmed. He stayed upright even after multiple lances penetrated his body but when his wrist mounted disruptor gave out and his spear wielding arm was dislocated, he found himself defenseless.

Hugh never got the chance to carry out Goval's suggestion and even though he and his men did their best to keep up a constant spray of disruptor fire, it was far too little to save the former drone.

"This is insanity," said Maya. "Cover me."

"Captain, no," said Holly but found himself as helpless as Hugh had been when he had watched his man's self-sacrifice. He let out a little sigh of relief when he realized that she had no intention to follow Goval's example. And yet he couldn't help but feel that what she intended wasn't much less ill-conceived.

She zigzagged through the chamber and right towards Hugh's position, managing in the process, to avoid a few Borg trying to bring her down, as well as the Xenarth soldiers and her own people's phaser blasts.

She slid the last few meters until she got behind another crate, just a couple of meters away from where Hugh had sought cover.

The Borg leader noticed her immediately and lifted his wrist canon in her direction. She responded in kind with her hand phaser. But then she flipped the weapon up and away from him. "Truce?"

"What do you want?" he barked angrily. The fact that he had not fired his weapon yet however was a promising sign.

"We can't hold out against this if we fight each other. Let us combine our forces. I think we can agree that neither of us wants to see the Xenarth getting their hands on Omega again."

"He ... he sacrificed himself for us to get a chance to obtain Particle 010," he said, his wrist wavering slightly, clearly shook up over what he had just witnessed.

"I know, I saw."

"You want to destroy it."

“Right now, I just want to survive the next ten minutes,” she said. “Tell you what, we push back this wave together and afterwards we’ll go back to figure out what to do about Omega. Do we have deal?” Maya had to duck suddenly when one of the Xenarth spears came flying her way, missing her by inches.

Hugh seemed torn.

“What would your friends back on the *Enterprise* think?”

He glared at her. “This is bigger than my friendships,” he said. “This is —”

“I know, I know, it’s your goddamned Holy Grail. Help me keep the Xenarth from using it to blow us all to kingdom come.”

His nod was barely perceivable but he lowered his wrist before aiming it once more at the Xenarth who by now had made significant inroads into the chamber, taking up cover positions near the entrance.”

The message was quickly received by both Hugh’s men and the Starfleet contingent. A temporary alliance had been struck, allowing both parties to focus on their common enemy.

And yet it was still not enough. The Xenarth kept pushing forward, reinforcements still streaming in.

Chief Holly had eventually followed Donners. His frown seemed to have been permanently etched into his weathered features by now. “We lost two more,” he said. “Mueller and T’Lok. Mueller is dead.”

“Can we win this Chief, tell me straight.”

His response was immediate. “No,” he said. “Not unless we up the ante. And a miracle or two couldn’t hurt either.”

He didn’t have to explain what he meant by upping the ante. Maya took a couple of seconds to consider this, seeing another Borg going down as he was impaled by one of the Xenarth spears which they were able to throw with uncanny accuracy.

“The Xenarth are overrunning all our positions, Captain,” Holly continued. “At this point nobody will survive this mission.”

The truth hurt. She had wanted to avoid taking the next step at any cost. Maya had already been devastated over their decision to assault a sovereign Xenarth installation in order to secure and destroy Omega. She had not wanted to play the role of the belligerent party. But over two hundred officer’s lives now depended on her next decision.

She made the hardest call of her life and hit her combadge. “This is the Captain to all hands. Use whatever means necessary to push the

Xenarth back. I say again, whatever means necessary,” she said. “The use of lethal force has been authorized.”

* * *

“The use of lethal force has been authorized.”

“Finally, the gloves come off,” said Mer’iab and promptly dialed up his phaser rifle all the way to eleven. It was the setting that had shown to be most effective against the Xenarth exoskeleton during their pre-mission simulations.

He had admired the captain’s initial restraint and her orders not to kill the enemy even if the opposition force clearly had no such scruples. Considering the size of the Xenarth contingent and the scope of the mission, it had been a laudable ambition. He had known it wasn’t going to be tenable the moment after their first contact with the enemy.

He wasn’t even sure if it would make much of a difference at this point. The chamber had come under heavy enemy attack and the only reason they had not yet been overrun outright, he guessed, was because the Xenarth were throwing most of their weight against Omega One, the captain’s team.

As a security chief, he hated the idea that he was nowhere near his commanding officer after she had made the—in his eyes—foolhardy decision to join the ground assault. For now he had to focus to keep the people in this chamber alive and the sooner he was able to beat back the Xenarth hordes, the sooner he could try and check in on the captain.

Unfortunately an end was simply not in sight.

“Keep at their flank,” he shouted at the injured Andorian Marine sergeant who nevertheless had been amongst the first to pick up a rifle after the Xenarth had made their first push. “Keep them from penetrating deeper into the chamber and away from the generator at all cost.”

Mer’iab fired his own, now deadly phaser rifle, one handed even as he shouted out orders to his men. His accuracy didn’t suffer and a handful of surprised insectoids went down quickly after being impaled by red-hot lances of phased energy.

Their assault had been rather unfocused thus far, putting emphasis on their higher numbers instead of on any strategy to efficiently secure the

chamber. They were further hamstrung by orders they must have been given to limit their own fire, mindful of the Omega generator in the room.

"Lieutenant, behind you," Yuen called out when he saw a Xenarth trying to sneak up on the avian from behind, having somehow managed to slip by their defenses.

Yuen needn't have worried.

Without even turning Mer'iab unfurled one of his wings which snapped backwards like a released rubber band, sweeping the insectoid clean off his feet. A well placed phaser blast by Yuen made sure he'd never get up again.

If the security officer was holding out for any sign of gratitude by the avian, he was going to wait a long time. Instead Mer'iab shot him the briefest of glances. "Get Elborough to finish this up yesterday."

Yuen nodded sharply and then went to find the science officer.

He did. She was cowering behind an equipment crate close to the still pulsating, globe-shaped generator.

"A.J.," he said as he kneeled next to the petrified woman. "How's it going?" he added with an easy smile.

She looked up at him as if he had lost his mind. "What do you think?"

"We really need you to finish up with that generator," he said and threw a thumb over his shoulder. "It's why we're all here, you know."

"Can we ... can we wait until the shooting stops?" she said with a very small voice.

"Don't think it's going to," he said and held out his hand for her. "Come on, I keep you covered."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart," he said and then pulled her back on her feet only to watch her flinch at the sound of battle all around them.

She nodded at his reassuringly easy smile and made her way back towards the generator while Yuen took position by the crate, taking a knee and bringing his phaser rifle to bear. He found no lack of targets as the Xenarth made another push to re-claim the chamber.

Mer'iab noticed this as well. Firing his now deadly weapon with pinpoint accuracy and watching dozens of Xenarth warriors fall, the difference it made, it appeared, was negligible.

"Grenades. Give me grenades on the opening right now," he shouted as he lifted off the ground just in time to avoid a concentrated barrage of

enemy fire on his position. He glided back down gracefully near where a number of his men had taken cover.

His order was followed promptly and numerous cylindrical-shaped explosives were lobed towards the entrance which continued to funnel in warriors by the dozens.

"Get down," he shouted and unfurled his wings over the men around him to cover them from the impending explosion.

The shockwave flattened Elborough. "What the hell?" she said as she tried to get back onto her feet. But before she could turn to see what had happened, she felt a strong hand holding her arm. She turned to see Yuen's dirt covered face.

"Leave that to us, okay? Just focus on the generator."

She nodded hesitantly.

"Once this is all over, I'll take you out for a drink," he added with a little smirk.

"Sounds fair," she said. "But please, don't let them do that again or none of this will matter anymore," she added and turned back to the Omega device with a smile on her face she wasn't quite able to dispel.

Mer'iab's first instinct was to check on the most sensitive machine in the room after he had recovered from the massive explosion and the chamber had stopped shaking. He found the generator no worse for wear and noticed with satisfaction that Yuen was keeping a close eye on their skittish science officer.

He glanced back at the opening but all he could see was dust.

"Cover me," he said before he easily leaped up from where he stood and glided towards the entrance, touching down just a handful of meters in front of the still settling dust cloud.

As much as he tried, it seemed impossible to see what lay beyond. His solution was surprisingly simple. He unfurled his wings once more and flapping them forward, he used them like a giant fan.

The shape which emerged from the now dissipating cloud caused him to hesitate for a moment as it did not seem to be consistent with what he had come to expect a Xenarth warrior to look like.

Too late did he realize that his first impression had been mistaken. The eight limbs outlined in the haze made it all too clear that he was facing another Xenarth, albeit one much larger than any he had encountered before. He came to regret his momentary hesitation when the massive figure launched itself forward with speed and agility belling its size and hit

him with a bone-jarring tackle and with such force that for a moment he felt as if he had been hit by a starship at warp speed.

He went down hard and before he had a chance to get his bearings, the massive Xenarth was on top of him.

"I will enjoy ripping those wings off your body," the clearly feminine voice hissed as they struggled on the cold and dirty floor. "You will come to rue the day you faced the Warrior Queen."

Mer'iab was hardly even aware that the Xenarth leader had not come alone, too preoccupied was he to keep her razor-sharp mandibles from separating his head from his body. He had lost his phaser rifle when she had jumped him and the queen herself appeared to be unarmed, apparently eager to kill her opponent with her bare hands. And the odds were squarely in her favor, considering she not only had the size-advantage, he was also outnumbered by the count of hands she had available to her. Two of which pummeled his midsection, one kept a tight grip on his throat while he struggled to keep the fourth away from his beak, no doubt trying to crush it.

His men were in no position to help. The queen had led another wave of warriors into the chamber which kept the Starfleet assault team beyond occupied.

He was not the last to realize that this wave was perhaps the fiercest yet and judging by the way they were throwing themselves at the assault team, it seemed they had been given orders to take back the chamber no matter the cost, and the cost, it appeared, meant overwhelming the intruder with superior numbers in close quarter melee combat.

Having apparently given up on the idea on taking on the Starfleet assault team from a distance and having been constantly outgunned in the process, the battle was quickly turning up-close and personal.

It was a fight, Mer'iab knew, they couldn't win.

The Xenarth soldiers were simply far better equipped to wage such a battle with their armored exoskeleton, razor-sharp mandibles and multi-purpose weaponry which they were able to wield either as a piercing spear or punishing staff.

They had no choice but to fight.

A few of the Marines had managed to snatch up some of the weapons the Xenarth had dropped and were holding their own for the moment while the wounded were being evacuated away from the immediate combat area.

Remembering everything they had learned about the Xenarth in their pre-mission investigations, Mer'iab managed to land a quick and vicious hit to the lightest armored part of his opponent's torso, buying himself a few seconds and just enough time to escape her immediate clutches and get some separation from the ferocious warrior.

He appraised her for a brief moment. She was nothing like Queen Ket or even most of the warriors they had faced so far. This Xenarth stood easily seven and half foot tall, with wide, powerful shoulders and thick arms.

She practically ripped two spear weapons away from a couple of astonished Xenarth soldiers and immediately began to wield them expertly and in a manner which reminded Mer'iab a little bit of a Klingon *Dahar* master working a *bat'leth* sword.

Her large compound eyes made contact with his and an immediate understanding passed between them. They were both leaders of their respective factions and for a moment there was an almost unspoken, if begrudging respect between them, even in the middle of this battlefield thrown into chaos. Warrior to warrior, for just an instant, they were the same, regardless of all their differences, physiological as well as philosophical.

That moment passed in a heartbeat, replaced by the absolute certainty that the outcome of this battle could only be determined by whoever was left standing at the end.

Ignoring all her little drones, Mer'iab charged the Xenarth Warrior Queen.

While the avian security chief usually preferred stealth when facing off a formidable opponent, there was little place for him to hide here and she saw him coming from a mile away, fully prepared for his assault.

He deftly dodged the first staff which had been aimed at his head but was less successful evading the second which she wielded like a lance and which struck him in his side, tearing through his flack vest and plumage.

Pain and blood were nothing new to the Aurelian and he pressed on regardless. Coming up just behind the giant insectoid, he kicked hard against the back of where he thought her knees were located.

When she didn't go down the way he had hoped, he wished he'd spent more time with Ket to study Xenarth anatomy.

The queen merely stumbled and then brought one of her weapons around in a wide arch, designed to strike his neck. The strength of the blow would surely have crushed his windpipe instantly.

Instead he managed to roll out of the way.

When he came up again he grabbed hold of her second spear, hoping to be able to dislodge it from her firm grip.

It was a complete no-go. Her strength was simply too great and the fact that she was able to hold on to it with two of her hands, made it nearly impossible for him to even the odds in that manner.

She high-kicked him into his chest, causing him to fly backwards and land hard against a near wall where he collapsed to the floor.

Her mandibles seemed to turn into something akin to a smirk as she bore down on him, entirely ignoring the battle raging around them.

Mer'iab needed a moment to catch his breath even though he was fully cognizant that it was a moment he didn't have. She had already raised both weapons, turning the gleaming spikes into his direction, no doubt planning a twin penetration of his torso.

That's when he heard phaser fire. A lot of it.

He knew immediately it wasn't coming from his people as they were too busy fending for their lives in close quarter combat.

The Warrior Queen had heard it too and turned her head to find the source of this unexpected commotion.

The security chief noticed the blue blur flying through the air perhaps half a second before the queen did. By then of course it was far too late for her to bring up her defenses.

The Andorian had catapulted herself into the air somehow, probably by jumping on top of a nearby computer station and brought her entire weight down onto the Xenarth leader in a flying, high-body tackle.

They both crashed to the floor.

Mer'iab was both relieved and disgusted at the same time. Had Beatiar Sh'Fane just saved his life? If so he would never hear the end of it.

The Andorian Marine commander however had made the same mistake he had done just moment ago. Underestimating the Xenarth queen's strength. Kneeling over her, she quickly freed her gun and pressed the muzzle against her opponent's skull, hoping to kill her quickly while she was down.

The Warrior Queen was a second faster and swatted the gun out of her face just before she could depress the trigger and causing it to fly in a

high arch across the room. Almost at the same time she brought up a second hand, hitting the Marine hard and sending her flying into the opposite direction.

Sh'Fane hadn't expected that much force but managed to soften her landing by rolling onto the floor before coming back up onto her feet and close to Mer'iab. She turned her head see the security chief pushing himself up to his full height.

"I had this covered," he said, without ever taking his eyes off his opponent.

"You're welcome," she responded, also avoiding eye contact and keeping them focused on the massive Xenarth instead.

"It does not matter how many of you there are," said the Queen, with angry clicking sounds dotting her words. "You cannot defeat me."

"Then why do you suddenly sound so desperate?" Mer'iab shot back. Witty repartee wasn't normally part of his fighting style but right now he needed any advantage he could get.

The other advantage? Sh'Fane's leaping tackle had knocked both of her weapons out of her hands and they were now lying unused just between them.

All three fighters seemed to notice this at the exact same moment and leaped into action once more.

Mer'iab got there first, scooping up the spear/staff before any of her many limbs could reach it. He got his fingers on the second one as well and threw it towards the Andorian who easily pulled it out of the air as if she had been fighting with such weapons all her life.

The avian had just enough time to bring his weapon up to block a double punch the queen was throwing his way. And even though deflected at the last moment, the force of the impact was almost as powerful as if she had landed a direct hit.

Sh'Fane didn't hesitate and swinging with both hands, she struck the Xenarth across the head, breaking off parts of a mandible in the process.

The queen uttered a high-pitched shriek but instead of letting it slow her down, it apparently only made her stronger. And madder.

She reached out for the staff still being held by the Andorian with lightning speed and to her utter surprise, lifted her clean off the floor and then, unbelievably, right over her head, causing the Marine to perform an involuntary, circus-like leap, flying high into air, going right over the Xenarth and then coming down hard behind her, crashing into the

unforgiving floor and landing on her back with a sick crunch and a loud groan of pain.

Mer'iab made the mistake of getting distracted by Sh'Fane's scary landing, not immediately realizing that the Xenarth had kept hold of her weapon and that it was now coming in fast for his head.

This time his dodge came too late and the staff struck him hard in the right shoulder, knocking him off his feet and causing him to land on the floor, painfully holding on to his dislocated shoulder.

The Xenarth uttered a hysterical laugh from seeing both her opponent at her feet. Or at least Mer'iab thought it was laughter.

He looked over to see if Sh'Fane was still breathing. "Lieutenant, are you still with me?"

The Andorian had somehow managed to roll over onto her stomach but when she tried to pull herself off the floor she just flopped back down when her strength gave out. He was relieved to find that her back, at the very least, didn't appear broken. "I think ... I may need ... a minute here."

Ignoring the pain in his side and shoulder, Mer'iab willed himself back onto his knees. "Don't have a minute."

As if to stress her point, the Warrior Queen swung her weapon again, once again trying to crush the avian's head. This time he saw it coming and rolled out of the way and came back up right next to the fallen Marine.

He noted with some satisfaction that the Warrior Queen had slowed down now. Possibly because she no longer saw the two injured aliens as a major threat but more likely because her own strength was failing after the painful blow she had taken to her face.

Mer'iab, still on his knees, placed a hand onto Sh'Fane's shoulder. "I hate to say this," he said, "but right about now I could really use your help."

She actually managed a smile at that, even through bleeding lips and possibly a broken nose. "I think ... that just may be ... worth it."

"Can you get up?"

She tried again. "If you're up ... I'm up," she said and managed to get on her knees with his help, breathing hard and clearly not without sharp pain.

Mer'iab watched the huge Xenarth slowly bearing down on them, still holding on to her weapon and getting ready for a final blow, this time no doubt planning on taking out both her opponent's in one devastating attack.

"I need you to distract her for a little bit while I try something else," he said quietly.

"What do you have in mind?"

He shot her a playful look. "Think holodeck."

She nodded with understanding, responding with a knowing smirk of her own. Then she focused on the approaching insectoid. "Make it fast, will you? This dance is not going to last."

"Be right back," he said and took off in a run.

"No you won't," the Xenarth hissed, not willing to entertain the notion that one of them was going to get away and deprive her of a justified double kill. She quickly spun her weapon around, ready to throw it with deadly strength and accuracy to perforate the fleeing avian.

Just as she was about to bring her arms forward to release her missile, Sh'Fane charged with a roaring battle cry, hailing back to the ancient warrior days of her forefathers.

This time she went low, tackling the surprised queen around her legs. She managed to get the spear off but her aim was untrue and instead of piercing her target it found a hapless Xenarth who immediately sagged to the ground after being penetrated with a sickening crunch.

The Warrior Queen was unable to keep her balance and dropped like a felled tree. The moment she was down, Sh'Fane jumped on top of her and began punching her repeatedly and viciously in the face.

And had she fought another humanoid, her fists would have made short work of that face. Instead she was up against the hardened exoskeleton of an insectoid and while she managed to do some damage to her large eyes and feelers, the pounding was doing just as much damage to her gloved fists.

The Xenarth intercepted her tireless blows with her lower arms and then responded in kind with her upper hands, smashing the momentarily paralyzed Andorian right into her own face. The third blow was strong enough to get her off her chest.

The Warrior Queen stood once more but this time grabbed hold of Sh'Fane by the collar of her fatigues and lifted her up a good eight feet into the air, holding her above her and considering the bleeding, dazed and seemingly beaten down woman in her grasp.

"You are so soft and fragile," she said with obvious disgust. "That's why you humanoids are so weak. That's why you'll never stand a chance against the might of the Xenarth Colony."

The look she was getting in return was apparently not quite what the Warrior Queen had expected. She tilted her head slightly, perhaps an expression of confusion upon noticing that twinkle in her opponent's eyes and the unmistakable crack of a smile on those blue and busted lips.

She brought up her upper arms to finish her for once and for all. "There is nothing you should be amused about. This is your end, little humanoid."

Sh'Fane's response was unintelligible through her broken and swollen lips.

But for some reason the Warrior Queen seemed eager to learn the Andorian's dying words. "What was that?"

The Marine mustered all the strength she had left to make herself heard. "I said," she paused for a moment to spit a wallop of cobalt-colored blood onto the floor before she managed with some effort to look above and behind the queen with a widening grin on her face. "Heads up."

The Xenarth took the bait and turned. At first she must have been confused as there was nothing immediately obvious which could have inspired the Andorian's bravery in face of certain death. But that was because she didn't look high enough.

He was gliding so far up, he was nearly brushing the ceiling, his wings fully unfurled and giving him a majestic look as he defied gravity. By the time he was finally spotted, he had already honed in on his target and came down with the speed of a cannonball.

The Xenarth let go out Sh'Fane, trying to whirl around in time to brace herself.

There wasn't going to be time.

She also didn't realize until the last moment that the avian had picked up a spear at some point and that the gleaming tip was held out just in front of him, almost like a flying joust, as he shot through the air on a collision course.

His loud screech echoed across the chamber and his massive wings flapped exactly once to slow his ascent and ensure this wouldn't end up a suicide run.

It was still more than enough speed to ram that spear right through her tough exterior and running it completely through the Xenarth Warrior Queen. The resulting collision knocked her down hard while Mer'iab managed to roll, looking all but a ball of feathers for a moment, knocking

down unprepared Xenarth and Starfleeters alike to absorb his momentum which otherwise would have been enough to break every bone in his body.

The queen shrieked again as she flopped helplessly onto the floor, trying desperately to dislodge the spear protruding from her chest with all four hands. But before she could remove it, Sh'Fane had collected what little remained of her strength, found the other weapon discarded earlier and walked over to the Xenarth wriggling on the floor in an almost leisurely fashion. She threw the weapon into the air to flip it over and then brought it down with all the force she could muster, putting all her weight against it as she drove that one through the Warrior Queen as well.

The second shriek, even louder than the ear-numbing cry that had come before, captured absolutely everyone's attention and for a brief moment the room fell almost deadly silent as every last Xenarth warrior stopped whatever they were doing at that moment to turn and find their slain queen.

* * *

Too little, too late.

She couldn't stop thinking it over and over again. Too little, too late, even as she cut down Xenarth warriors left and right, killing the tough insectoids by the dozens while desperately ignoring the fact that she was taking life almost indiscriminately. Trying to pretend it hadn't been her who had been the attacker, it hadn't been her who had given the orders to assault this sovereign Xenarth facility and now to shoot and kill.

It was for the good of the galaxy, she told herself. She was trying to save lives, she told herself. And in the end it may all come to nothing after all because she had given the orders too late.

There were simply too many of them and not enough bodies to fight them off. They were already overwhelmed and barely holding their own. No doubt more Xenarth reinforcements were on the way.

"Captain, get down."

Before she could even turn to look who had shouted the warning, she felt a strong grip push her to the floor. The spear-like weapon came flying in over her head almost at the same instant, she could feel it brush by her hair. It struck something.

The Vulcan woman didn't as much as flinch as the razor-sharp blade ripped through her side, tearing through her flak jacket and flesh.

"V'Ner," Maya cried.

"Stay down," she said as she brought up her phaser rifle single-handed while her other hand was busy holding her side, barely able to keep the staunch of thick green blood back. She fired the rifle and struck the Xenarth warrior who had tried to take down the captain right in the neck.

The insectoid went down in a heap.

One down, Maya thought, legion to go.

Her personal bodyguard was clearly wounded but the stoic Vulcan security guard showed no signs of slowing down as she continued to cover Maya with her phaser even as the captain picked herself up off the ground.

"You need medical attention," Maya said but found that she couldn't quite afford taking her eyes off the enemy all around her and instead kept up a constant pace of weapons fire which did little to suppress the enemy and even less to stop them.

"Later, ma'am."

There was little point in arguing, Maya realized. By now almost everyone was battling with injuries, light or severe, O'Shaugnessy, her other appointed bodyguard was already down for the count. She wasn't sure if he was dead or alive.

She found Chief Holly, standing on a number of containers, overlooking the battlefield like a field marshal of old. He made a mighty inviting target up there but it also allowed him to maintain a semblance of control in the chaos, directing their meager resources where they were needed most. The gray-bearded veteran didn't look like his best days were behind him. On the contrary, banged up and bleeding from multiple wounds and scratches, he was directing the troops with ironclad confidence, trying to dispel any notion that this battle may have already been lost.

"We've got more bugs coming in through the main entrance," he shouted. "Cut them off, cut them off." Then he made eye contact with Donners and just for a second his façade slipped and his eyes revealed not just his age and his exhaustion but his hopelessness of winning this battle. It was gone in a flash. "Sonier, get your people over there and cover Daystrom," he shouted to a group of Marines who didn't hesitate to take orders from the Master Chief.

Maya spotted Hugh on the opposite side of the room, engaged with two dozen Xenarth. Their temporary truce had given them some time

which was rapidly running out. From what she could tell, the former Borg drone had already lost half his men, mostly due to the Xenarth using their blades in close quarter combat which was not a preferred Borg battle style, liberated or otherwise.

He was barely holding his ground and it was only a matter of time until he and his remaining men were overwhelmed by the sheer number of the opposition force.

She had taken a second too long to consider their seemingly inevitable fate and failed to notice the staff being side swiped into her direction. Fortunately for her, it wasn't the sharp end which ended up striking her torso. The blow was more than enough however to force all the remaining air out of her lungs and flinging her back to the floor and sending her rifle out of her hands.

When she looked up she saw the gleaming spike now pointed at her bruised torso once more. The cold, dark compound eyes of the Xenarth warrior seemed to be focused on her with total determination.

Is this how it ends, then? She wondered, as the warrior was bringing down his weapon, gripping it tightly with all four hands. Shortest captaincy ever?

She forced herself not to close her eyes.

Then she heard the shriek. It was a sound of pure agony and it reverberated from the walls and the ceiling, louder even than the sound of unrelenting battle. Maya thought it was a sound she'd never forget.

The Xenarth stopped suddenly, his weapon just inches from running her through, he turned his head towards where the sound had come from. It hadn't been this room. It hadn't even been close and yet it appeared to have been unmistakable to the soldier.

And then she realized it hadn't just been the warrior who'd had her dead to rights who had stopped. All of them had. Every single Xenarth in the room had suddenly frozen and turned towards the shriek of pain and misery.

And the Starfleeters had been shocked into inaction themselves by their enemies' odd behavior. For a moment that shriek remained the only sound anyone could hear. Then it died away slowly and the room remained eerily quiet with a hundred combatants simply standing in place like statues.

Maya, realizing that she was still in mortal danger, quickly pushed herself away from that gleaming spike hovering above her.

"Take'em down, take'em all down. Do it, do it now," she heard Holly cry and promptly opened fire on the unmoving Xenarth.

Within seconds every phaser and Borg weapon in the room was blasting the momentarily defenseless insectoids to pieces and they crumbled where they stood.

Maya hated herself for it but the moment she found her rifle again, she took aim and took down the soldier who had tried to perforate her a moment earlier.

Some of the Xenarth eventually tried to fight back but at that time it was already too late. A battle which had seemed all but lost seconds ago, had completely and irrevocably turned around. By the time Maya was back on her feet, not a single enemy soldier remained standing. A few Starfleeters were still firing however, blasting away at injured or already dead Xenarth to make doubly sure they'd never stand up again.

Maya stepped up to a crewman who was taking aim at a squirming Xenarth on the ground, already oozing profusely from a number of wounds. The young man was bringing up his weapon to the warrior's head to finish him off but she pushed his rifle away before he could fire. "That's enough, Crewman."

His eyes were wide and filled with rage and hatred. The firm look in his captain's eyes seemed to reassure him however. She was neither upset nor accusing but her tone left little doubt to her resolve. "That's enough."

Then she turned to the rest of her people. "Cease fire and secure the room."

"Let's do it, people, we're not out of this yet," Holly shouted, adding some much needed urgency. Then he hopped down from his elevated position and approached the captain.

"You were asking for a miracle earlier, Chief. Somebody just delivered," she said to him.

He nodded. "I'm not one to look a gift *targ* in the mouth. It has rather sharp teeth and all but if you ask me this is just a reprieve. We need to pack up and get the hell out of Dodge yesterday."

"Agreed," she said and quickly headed towards Daystrom and the surprisingly undamaged Omega generator which she quickly found was still pulsating with blue energy, a clear sign that the molecules within were still very much alive and well. Her heart sank.

The scientist was only lightly wounded with his flak jacket slightly torn around the chest and arms. "Captain," he said when he saw her approach.

"Wayne, tell me we're almost done here."

He looked pained as if he didn't want to reveal the truth with which his captain would clearly not be satisfied with it. Then he shook his head ever so slightly. "I ... I can't do it."

Maya became furious. "Wayne, so help me God, I will—"

"Captain, you don't understand. I couldn't shut them down even if I wanted to. The molecules have fully bonded, there is no way to reverse the effect from here. I'm sorry."

Hugh had stepped up to generator as if in trance. "I can see them," he said reverently as if he was facing the physical manifestation of a deity. "I can see them through my optical implant. It's ... it's perfection."

The other former Borg quickly gathered around him, equally spellbound by the pulsating chamber in front of them.

Maya hit her combadge. "Donners to Cuffe, what's our status?"

Glover responded with little delay. *"All teams are reporting that they have completed their objectives and are moving to their exfil positions. We're not quite sure what happened yet but the Xenarth seem to have been stunned into inaction for a short moment. They are back on the move now."*

"Can you beam the teams out?"

"Negative, not with the residual Omega radiation emanating from the various generator locations. And the radiation is through the roof at your position. How close are you to shutting down your generator?"

Maya watched the former drones wordlessly for a moment. Where they praying? "Apparently no longer an option. We'll have to go to plan B."

"Not sure if we're ready for it yet."

"We've got movement," called Holly who had proceeded closer to the main entrance. "Second wave coming in."

Donners whipped around. She couldn't see anything yet but the sound was unmistakable, the pounding of boots, the clicks of Xenarth ready for battle were approaching rapidly. "Glover, are you getting this?"

"We're seeing it on sensors. You've got at least sixty bodies heading your way. Two minutes, maybe less," he said, managing to sound cool under pressure but then again it wasn't his butt about to be overrun, she mused darkly. *"Maya, set up the pattern enhancers, we'll be ready."*

Holly had overheard Glover and was already directing half the men to take position by the entrance to mount their defense and getting the rest to set up the pattern enhancers around the Omega generator to allow *Cuffe* to beam the molecules into its resonance chamber where they could be neutralized.

“Ma’am.”

She turned to find who had addressed her. It was Redmon O’Shaugnessy, one of the two security officers Mer’iab had designated as her personal guards during the assault. The young Irishman had been injured earlier and was quite obviously not on the mend. His face was sickly pale and his bandages were already soaked through with his blood again. He barely managed to keep his balance. A heavy backpack was strapped to his back.

“Lieutenant, you need the medic,” she said and then turned to find a first aider. “Corpsman?”

“Captain,” he said and coughed hard, spraying blood onto his hands in the process. “I think ... it may be too late for that. But ... I can give you the time ... you need. I’ve got the explosives,” he added gesturing first to the backpack and then to the main entrance.

It took Maya a moment to understand what he was saying. Then she quickly shook her head. “Absolutely not, that’s suicide.”

“Please, Captain, it may be our only chance,” he said, coughing again.

Something that Vej had said days earlier reverberated in the back of her mind. Something about sending good people to their certain death.

She turned back to see how far along the pattern enhancers were. There were twelve in total and the cylindrical-shaped devices had to be carefully positioned around the Omega generator in order to allow *Cuffe* to get a stable signal on those molecules and beam them up. Only half of them were in place.

And those pounding boots were mere moments from reaching them.

Maya looked at O’Shaugnessy. “Do it.”

He gave her a crisp nod and then she watched in astonishment how he managed to sprint towards the entrance despite his grievous injuries.

Holly saw him coming and understood. “Clear the area, clear the area,” he said to the men positioned closest to the entrance. He exchanged a meaningful look with the younger lieutenant as he sprinted passed him, giving the man one last nod before he rushed into the dark corridor.

Maya held her breath for the next few seconds.

Then came the explosion.

The floor trembled and a bright light shot out of the corridor, giving absolute proof that O'Shaugnessy had been successful in his final act of valor and heroism.

The clicks quickly gave way to shrieks and then all was still for a moment.

A small dust cloud came wafting out of the hallway.

"Pattern enhancers in place," said Daystrom.

Maya watched as they were turned on, a bright blue beam shooting out from each device until the generator was completely surrounded.

"Glover to Donners, we've got a lock."

She nodded. "Any chance you can get us out here the same way?"

He hesitated for a moment. *"Sorry, no. All the eggheads up here seem to agree that adding additional molecules to the attempt is a recipe for disaster. We're not even sure we can get the molecules safely out of there."*

"Understood."

"In any case," he said. *"I suggest you hightail it out of there. The main force heading your way has stopped but there are plenty more Xenarth trying to reach you and cut you off from your extraction point. You'll still have a battle on your hands just to clear out."*

She turned to what remained of her people. "Set up timed charges on the generator and get the wounded ready to move out. Double time folks."

Nobody had to be told twice.

Daystrom joined the Borg in watching the molecules beginning to dissolve as they were transported onto the starship in orbit. It wasn't an instant process.

"How long will this take?" Donners asked.

"I'm not sure," he said as he kept his eyes on the Omega generator which turned dimmer by the moment. "But it can't be stopped now. I doubt we have to stick around to the end."

"We'd be lucky to get out of here alive if we leave now," she said.

Hugh turned away from the generator for the first time in what had seemed forever and considered the Starfleet captain. "We can help."

"A little while ago you were willing to kill us all to stop us from destroying Omega, now you're just going to help us get out of here?" she said skeptically but fully aware that Hugh and his men had made no attempt to stop them from beaming out the molecules and claiming them

for themselves. She had anticipated another battle but just like Holly, she decided to stay away from those *targ* teeth.

“I only ask that you allow me to see them up close, in your resonance chamber.”

She considered this for a moment. Hugh didn't really have the numbers anymore to try and fight the admittedly decimated assault team. But she could use his help to avoid further casualties while evacuating the facility.

“No promises,” she said and found Hugh surprisingly relaxed and reverent perhaps for the first time since she had met him. It was almost as if he had found some inner peace by observing the fully bonded Omega particles. He was almost serene now.

He nodded in agreement.

She found her phaser rifle and gripped it firmly. “Let's move it people.”

“Somebody talk to me.”

Terrence Glover stood from his chair after he decided he could no longer handle the rising tension on the bridge sitting down. He knew everyone was doing what they had to, the dozen or so officers on the bridge talking to each other as they passed information back and forth but nobody, it seemed was keeping him advised and that was simply not good enough.

“Lieutenant Meldin reports his team is three minutes from the extraction point. Minimal resistance to exfil,” said Bhuto, turning from ops to give her report.

Glover nodded. His mission had been to locate and neutralize any boronite caches in the facility, a vital objective to ensure the Xenarth would not be able to just pick up the pieces and try again once this mission was complete. Sensors had already confirmed that no trace of boronite containing material remained.

“Lieutenant Sh’Fane’s team is two minutes from their extraction point,” this from another bridge officer tasked to oversee the ground assault progress.

Omega-Three, the team lead by *Agamemnon’s* Marine commander had joined up with Lure Mer’iab’s people earlier to assist fighting back a Xenarth onslaught after they had successfully neutralized the third Omega generator. Following the defeat of the Warrior Queen the two teams had split up again to head for their respective extraction points.

Kojo stood at tactical behind the captain. “Captain Donners’ and Lieutenant Mer’iab’s teams are four minutes from extraction.”

“We still can’t use transporters?” said Glover and glanced at the main viewscreen which was currently set up in split-screen mode. The left showed a tactical display of the facility on Zenith along with movements of friend and foe alike, the right showed *Cuffe’s* main cargo hold were Pedro

Rojas, Seb N'Saba and a whole bunch of engineers and science personnel were swarming around the resonance chamber that had been set up there.

Rojas turned to face the screen, shaking his head. *"Not going to happen,"* the chief engineer said. *"Even if we were confident in being able to beam up the Omega molecules alongside bio-matter, which we are not, we're currently using every last drop of energy in the transporter system to beam up the molecules without them disintegrating during the process. And trust me, you don't want that to happen."*

"We've got two starships, Pedro. You telling me we can't use Agamemnon either?"

"She's using her targeting sensors to ensure we're doing this right," he said. *"Sorry but for the moment, we're not beaming anything aboard other than these blasted molecules."*

"How much longer?"

The chief engineer turned back to look at the resonance chamber which was already glowing and pulsing with dim blue light. *"We've got about half of them up here. Maybe another ten minutes."*

Cuffe's captain looked at his Andorian ops officer. *"Where are our Romulan party-crashers?"*

"Should be coming in range in about thirteen minutes."

"Damn tight."

"Captain, there is something else."

Glover looked at the screen where his lupine science officer had stepped closer to the visual pickup, his artificial eyes glowing with undeniable intensity.

"What now?"

"I've done the calculations but I don't think we can safely neutralize the particles before the Romulans reach our location. The harmonic resonance required to safely neutralize this many molecules far exceeds the tolerance of the chamber itself."

Glover massages his temples. *"What are you saying? That you can no longer destroy them? What the hell are we doing all this for then?"*

"We can still neutralize them with a lower resonance frequency but it will take longer."

"How much longer?"

"An hour, perhaps two."

"And in the meantime we face a fire-fight with three to four Romulan Warbirds," said Kojo. *"We're not going to survive that."*

"Nobody will," said the science officer. *"Not if they land a lucky hit and take out the cargo bay, destabilizing Omega in the process."*

"And we sure as hell are not just going to hand them over," said Glover, finding himself in one of those rare situations in which he had no feasible option to fulfill his mission.

"There may be another way." This from the science officer on the view-screen.

"Don't keep us in suspense," said Glover, keeping himself from barking at the man.

"GRS 2127-341."

Terrence didn't understand straight away but Bheto nodded in agreement before turning to look at him. "The black hole."

"We dump whatever we cannot neutralize inside."

The captain looked at his helmsman. "How quickly can you get us there, Ensign?"

Jean Hajar had begun her computations before he had even asked. "We'll be limited to impulse and low warp for most of our way there. About twenty-five minutes."

"We should be able to stay ahead of the Romulans if we can depart before they get here," said Bheto from ops. "They won't be able to go any faster than we can."

"Still going to be tight," said the first officer.

"I take tight over dead," the captain said but then noticed something else on the screen. On the tactical display on the left. More and more red dots, signifying the enemy, were appearing close to Donners' extraction point. The very same her team was rapidly moving towards.

Kojo noticed it too. "It's an ambush."

Glover took a step closer to the screen as if his proximity to the monitor would make a difference. "Get me through to her, now."

"You've got threat signatures closing in on your extraction point. Omega-Two's LZ is already compromised and we had to pull out the shuttles before they were overrun. Mer'iab's team is re-routing to your extraction as we speak. With Sh'Fane and Meldin's teams already wheels-up, yours is the only exfil we have left."

Donners took Glover's report in stride. Quite literally. Enemy approaching or not, she knew she couldn't afford to slow down because no matter how many Xenarth had been sent to cut off their escape route, there was an even greater number on their heels, trying to surround them on all sites.

"How we doing on casualties?"

"I don't think this is the best time to get sidetracked with – "

"Just tell me," she said, cutting the other captain off.

She heard him sigh audibly. *"We've got sixteen confirmed KIA and at least thirty wounded."*

Maya knew that casualties had been unavoidable but realizing how many people they had already lost on a single mission, her first as a captain no less, was not easy to swallow.

She stopped in the middle of an intersection, much to V'Ner's displeasure; her only remaining bodyguard had stuck to her like glue and driven her hard, almost bordering on subordination, to keep moving towards the now questionable safety of the extraction point.

Maya paid the chief petty officer little mind and turned towards the rest of her team, especially the slow-moving strugglers. Most if not everyone was wounded somehow, the luckiest ones had come away with superficial scrapes and flesh wounds, the worst cases had either lost consciousness or entire limbs from the brutal close-quarter combat with the relentless Xenarth warriors.

She found Chief Holly taking up the rear, doing his best to have the more seriously wounded security personnel and Marines keep up with the rest of the team.

To Maya they were not moving fast enough. "Chief, let's pick up the pace," she shouted loud enough to make sure her firm voice was being heard by every last person still awake. "I'm not losing one more man on this damned rock."

"Yes, sir," the senior NCO hollered back loudly. "You've heard the lady. You rest when we get back to the ship, until then you haul ass."

Maya could tell the message was received but for some it was simply physically impossible to move any faster, no matter how much Holly yelled at them.

"We will not make it out of here at this rate," said Hugh who had stepped up to Maya after observing their progress in a cold, analytical, almost Borg-like manner.

She turned on him, anger flashing in her eyes. "I'm open to suggestions," she said. "You and your people seemed to have no problem beaming in here, how about you get us all out the same way?"

Hugh shook his head. "The vessel we used is too small to carry more than my men," he said. "I could get you out of here if you wish. Perhaps a few more of your people."

"Captain, I urge you to take that offer," V'Ner said.

"Not a chance, I'm not leaving anyone behind," she said and then turned back towards Hugh with newly found appreciation. Not because he had offered her a way out of this but because he himself hadn't yet followed his own advice. Apparently having decided to make good on his promise and stick with her on this no matter how bad it would get. She wasn't sure how much this was simply because he wanted her to keep her side of the bargain and allow him to see Omega again.

She found Holly once more. "Chief, find out who's slowing us down the most," she said and immediately hated herself for the way she had phrased that. "Whoever has the most critical injuries," she corrected herself before she glanced back at Hugh. "How many can you take?"

"Ten, maybe fifteen, plus one of my people to pilot the vessel. It will be a tight fit."

She nodded. "We'll take it," she said and then to Holly: "Fifteen souls, Chief. Find them now, they're getting a ride on Hugh's shuttle." She could see that nobody in her team was comfortable with that idea, some

may have preferred being killed in combat than taking the chance of being beamed onto a Borg vessel, fears of brutal assimilation no doubt playing out in their heads. Maya would have none of that. "Do it now. No arguments, no hesitations, get it done."

Holly understood and within moments those who couldn't walk, those who had to be carried or were close to collapsing, disappeared in bright shimmers of emerald colored light along with one of the surviving former Borg drones.

"How long until they can make it to one of our ships and then come back for a second pick-up?" Maya said.

"Too long," said Hugh. "Even our transporters are affected by the 010 radiation. The shuttle has to get fairly close to the surface to get a transporter lock."

She nodded. "Alright, folks, that means no more free rides, we're on our own, keep moving."

But even lightening their ranks by fifteen injured crewmen made a big difference and where their progress had previously been handicapped by a couple of men on stretchers and a few others who could only remain on their feet by being carried by others, the pace now picked up significantly, allowing the rest of the team to proceed in a steady trot.

Maya felt a sense of relief when she spotted the vertical tunnel which had been dug earlier and which currently functioned as *Nelson Mandela's* improvised landing bay.

Star-Wanderer and a couple of Marines were waiting for them by the opening which had been blown into the facility and led to their extraction point.

"Let's pack in tight," she said to her people as she watched them head for the runabout, "We're giving Omega-Two a lift as well so it won't be a comfortable ride." She shot a glance at the Xelatian pilot. "Any trouble taking off with the extra weight?"

The face-plated officer offered a nod. "It will be rough but we'll make it."

Donners hit her combadge. "Glover, we've reached our exfil point. Where the hell is Omega-Two?"

"Couple of minutes out. Maya ..."

"What is it?" she said when he uncharacteristically stopped himself in mid-sentence.

"The Xenarth will be on top of you much sooner than that. You need to go now."

"I'm not leaving them behind."

"Maya, listen to me," he said, keeping his voice free of the arrogance and haughtiness that people often attributed to him. *"If you don't get out now, you won't get out at all."*

"Incoming!"

Holly's cry came less than a second before the shooting started. Xenarth troops were converging on the extraction point from both ends of the corridor and they had opened fire the moment they had their targets in sight.

One unlucky security man was cut down instantly. Another shot slammed into Holly's side, causing him to stumble and fall hard. Maya watched in amazement as the man defied his years and picked himself back up, his face a grimace of pain, he nevertheless helped a Marine to pick up the fallen man and drag him towards the opening leading to the runabout.

He briefly made eye contact with her but instead of communicating the agony he surely felt, what his intense eyes made clear to her beyond a shadow of a doubt was that they could not survive this latest onslaught.

V'Ner ignored rank and protocol and harshly pushed the starship captain out of the corridor before she, along with the Borg and others returned fire. It was an effort to slow down the latest Xenarth advance and it achieved little.

Maya hit her combadge. *"Donners to Mer'iab, what's your status?"*

"We're coming across heavy resistance, Captain," he said and apparently had to stop himself as he had to shout orders to his men to take cover and return fire.

"Lieutenant, I need you to make exfil now."

There was a short delay. *"Unable to comply,"* he said and sounded pained to having to admit this. No matter how much he willed it, no matter how much he wanted to follow her orders, this was one he wasn't able to.

Accepting this turned out to be difficult. Mer'iab's team consisted out of nearly fifty men and women which she would leave behind to certain death if she ordered their retreat now. Intellectually she understood that the alternative was to possibly lose close to a hundred men by trying to stay behind and fight against seemingly impossible odds.

She heard Vej's words he had spoken to her fairly recently in the back of her mind: *"I want to make you aware of the responsibility which now rests solely on your shoulders. I want you to be able to deal with a difficult situation when it sneaks up on you from seemingly out of the blue without it leaving you paralyzed."*

Kobayashi Maru all over again but this time for real. The ultimate no-win scenario and it was threatening to do to her exactly what Vej had warned her about. *Don't let fear of your decision paralyze you.*

She slapped her combadge again so hard it hurt. "Lieutenant, you have new orders. Stay alive. No matter what it takes, keep your team alive. We'll be back for you."

"Understood, sir, Mer'iab out," he said before he closed the channel almost as if to spare her from having to cut him loose herself. His voice had been firm and had not allowed any indication that he had doubted her words. She wasn't sure if she didn't doubt them herself.

Maya turned to the rest of her people. "Pull back, pull back, we're getting out of here now."

Nelson Mandela, 2372

The runabout had turned out to be a lot less packed than Maya had expected and so she had easily found a quiet niche for herself in one of the compact crew modules just large enough for a fold out chair and desk and a double bunk.

Chief Holly found the captain sitting in the chair with her back towards the door. "Sir."

"Give me a minute, Chief," she said in a surprisingly small voice.

But instead the veteran NCO took a step inside to allow the door to close behind him. "With all due respect, I don't think we have that kind of time, sir."

She turned to face him, unable to hide her red eyes and the fact that she had cried not a moment earlier.

"If you were anybody else, I would ask if you're alright," he said. "But you're not anybody else. You're the captain. You don't have a choice in the matter. You have to be alright. At least until the current crisis is over." He walked over to the wall-mounted replicator and typed in a command into the interface. Within a moment a tiny ampoule materialized and he picked it up and handed it over to Donners.

She looked at it for a second before she understood what it was. Then she threw her head back and applied a couple of drops of the clear liquid into each eye. She wiped away any residual moisture and when she leveled her head again, Holly noticed that her irises were as brilliantly white as they used to be.

She stood and stepped up to him, touching his upper arm. "Thank you, Chief."

He responded with a firm nod.

Then she was out the door with him following close behind.

"What do we got?" she said as she stepped into the runabout's cockpit, her voice firm and strong, showing no evidence of her weakness just moments earlier.

"We're three minutes from *Agamemnon*. All other vessels have already docked with *Cuffe* or are doing so as we speak," said Star-Wandered from the CONN.

"According to sensors the Romulans are still ten minutes out from our position," said Daystrom and turned from his station to look at the captain. "I've just spoken to N'Saba on the *Cuffe*. They have completed beaming the Omega molecules aboard but they won't be able to neutralize it using the resonance chamber before the Romulans get here. The current plan is to head for the nearby black hole and dump them inside instead."

Maya was already toggling the comm to Glover's ship. "Donners to *Cuffe*."

"Terrence here, glad to hear you got off that rock."

"Now that you've got Omega onboard, can you get a lock on my team on the surface and beam them up as well?"

"We're looking into it. The problem is that our transporters as well as the targeting sensors on the Agamemnon needed to be precisely calibrated to lock on to the Omega molecules. We might not have the time to recalibrate them for personnel transport by the time the Romulans get here."

Donners considered that for a moment. "Fine. You go ahead and dump Omega in the black hole and I keep *Agamemnon* behind to get my people back."

"You do that, you might find yourself in a battle against three or even four warbirds, if Toreth rejoins the fight. I don't like those odds."

Maya shook her head. "The Romulans want Omega. They'll chase after you instead of wasting their time here. Best case scenario I can buy you some time by distracting them a bit."

Glover didn't respond to this which Maya thought to be uncharacteristically reticent for her fellow captain. Then she spotted Daystrom who had stood from his station to step closer to the viewport. At first she figured that this was because he had spotted the approaching Romulan flotilla.

"My God," he said.

Curious she followed his glance to see what had caused his surprise. And then she saw it too. Those weren't Romulan ships he had spotted. These were quite a few magnitudes more massive and shaped perfectly

symmetrically. A cold shudder ran up her spine when understanding dawned on her. Up to this point it had been difficult to imagine that this day could become much worse and yet the universe kept finding ways to make it just that.

"Maya," Glover said, his voice not quite as firm as it used to be. *"We have another problem and a lot less time than we thought."*

Iota Crucis IV, 2267

The explosion had been powerful enough to knock Robert Wesley onto the floor of the room he had been assigned by the Xenarth for the duration of his stay, along with everything else that was not bolted down.

His first instinct had been that his worst nightmare had come true. Not only had Ketteract failed to stabilize the Omega molecule, he and his overeager Xenarth counterparts had triggered it somehow, bringing along the feared apocalypse which would be felt across the entire quadrant.

But once he realized that such an outcome would most likely not have resulted in just bruises and aching bones, he dismissed the notion that the galaxy as he knew it had come to a premature end. It didn't mean that they were safe. For all he knew, the explosion had only been the first act in a series of devastating blasts caused by this unstable Omega particle.

Still fearing, not only for the safety of his ship and crew but much of the known galaxy, he picked himself up from the floor and headed towards the balcony of his twelfth floor room. All the while mentally berating himself for having allowed matters to progress this far. His gut-instinct had told him to put a stop to these seemingly uncontrollable experiments the moment he had learned about them. The Xenarth and the Prime Directive be damned.

Now, three days had passed since they had arrived on this world and Ketteract had made God-knew what kind of progress to either hand the Xenarth one of the most powerful forces known to man or bringing them all one step closer to total annihilation.

Once outside he immediately directed his gaze towards the nearby mountain within which he knew Ketteract and the Xenarth scientists had been effortlessly working on synthesizing the molecules. He breathed a sigh of relief when he found no apparent signs of damage and catastrophe. The dome on top of the mountain also appeared undisturbed.

He found the source of the explosion much closer. Back smoke was rising within one of the nearby habitats and he could see an entire block of buildings crumbling and on fire. A number of Xenarth were swarming around the damage, to escape it or try to put out the flames, at the distance he wasn't able to tell.

The doors to his room opened and he turned to see Kutznetsov and Mtolu rushing inside. Both seemingly greatly concerned.

"Commodore, are you alright?" the Zulu security officer asked.

"Banged up a little but otherwise uninjured, thanks Nealo. How's the rest of the away team?"

The security officer had his phaser drawn and carefully looked Wesley over until seemingly convinced that he had not been seriously injured. Only then did he replace his weapon and relaxed.

"Vincent and Zha'Thara are on their way back here as we speak. Ketteract is fine too, apparently. From what Talana said over the comm., he refused to leave the lab," said the Bear.

"Of course he did. Any idea what happened?"

The Russian joined Wesley on the balcony to get a better look at the damage in the other habitat. "Some sort of attack. Tensions between Ergia and the Warrior Queen have been worsening over the last couple of days. It appears it finally reached the breaking point."

The commodore nodded and then looked towards Mtolu. "Lieutenant, see if you can find Selphi. I want to know as much as possible about what has happened."

The man gave his captain a short nod and then departed, leaving Kutznetsov and Wesley alone on the balcony. For a moment neither of the men spoke as they both silently watched the fires in the other dome, now clearly spreading to nearby buildings, threatening to destroy the entire habitat. The Xenarth first responders appeared to struggle to contain the blaze.

"What the hell are we doing here, Alexei?"

The burly Russian aimed a perplexed sidelong look at the older man. "We're trying to keep the Xenarth from accidentally blowing up the universe. Sir."

He nodded slowly. "Sure. But in the process we have inserted ourselves as a variable in their own civil war. We are actively helping one side to get what they want over the obvious wishes of another faction. This will be coming to blows soon at which time we'll be forced to decide whose

side we support," he said and looked straight at Kutznetsov. "That's not a decision a Starfleet officer should ever make."

The first officer considered this for a moment, apparently quite cognizant of the dilemma they were facing. "The Xenarth poses a power much too dangerous not just for them but for our galaxy. I fear the thought of what the Klingons or the Romulans would ever do if they had access to this kind of technology. By helping them now to bring their portal back online, to take them to wherever they wish to go, we may be neutralizing a serious threat to our quadrant of space."

"And allow them to threaten another one instead?" said Wesley. "And what about those Xenarth?" he added and pointed at the raging fires in the not so far distance. "What about the ones who have no interest in trying to reach this fabled Xendaru and want to make this planet their home instead? Are we to make this decision for them as well?"

"It occurs to me that we have already involved ourselves in Xenarth affairs," said Kutznetsov. "Whatever we do next will have a significant negative impact on one side or the other."

Further deliberations on the subject were cut short when Charles Vincent and Talana Zha'Thara entered Wesley's room. The two men on the balcony stepped back inside to greet them.

The commodore went straight to business. "We have one day left until the supreme's deadline expires. What's the progress with the molecules?"

The Andorian had a pained expression on her face.

Vincent found an upturned chair, set it back onto his feet and took a seat. The middle-aged doctor was slightly out of breath.

"Not a good time to play coy," said Kutznetsov sternly, shooting both of them impatient looks.

The doctor and the science officer exchanged quick glances before Zha'Thara faced her superior officers again. "We are concerned. About Ketteract."

The first officer uttered a dismissive hiss. "*Da*. But what else is new?"

Vincent shook his head. "It's worse. The man has become practically obsessed over this Omega molecule of his. He has worked in that lab for three days straight. If he's eaten or slept in that time, I haven't seen it. The man is teetering at the brink of madness, if you ask me, and has no business playing around with something as powerful as these molecules are supposed to be."

"Doctor, is it your professional, medical opinion that Bendes Ketteract is mentally unsound to carry out research on the Omega molecule?" Wesley wanted to know.

"Psychology is not my field, Commodore and even if it were, I probably would need to do much more work before being able to give you a full diagnosis. If you want to know about my initial impression, as well as my time-honored gut feeling then yes, the man is showing clear warning signs of the onset of a full blown psychosis and shouldn't be anywhere near anything more powerful than a toaster."

"The problem is," said the science officer, "that the Xenarth have come to almost revere the man. They are convinced that with his help they are close to a breakthrough to have the molecules stabilized and their Star Portal up and running within a few days."

"And what do you think?" Kutznetsov said.

"I have spent the last three days looking over Ketteract and Queen Chelra's shoulders and I still don't fully understand how Omega works but they are not wrong about their progress. I'm sure they have their first molecules fully synthesized either today or before the end of the day tomorrow. Or at least made the attempt."

The first officer gave the commodore a concerned look.

A second explosion gripped the room, causing the floor under their feet to tremble. Wesley, Kutznetsov and Zha'Thara had to struggle to keep their balance while Vincent slipped out of his chair and fell onto the floor.

"Not again," the doctor moaned, rubbing his bruised backside.

The tremble subsided and the first officer helped Vincent back onto his feet.

"Commodore," Zha'Thara was pointing into the distance and Wesley turned to see that another habitat had taken damage in a separate attack. Once again flames and smoke quickly filled the dome.

Not a moment later Mtolo returned, bringing the Artisan Queen with him. The insectoid appeared agitated, judging by her twitching mandibles and her feelers which refused to stay still. "Commodore, I am relieved to find you unharmed," she said quickly. "The Warrior Queen is making her move against Ergia and I am concerned that her followers are too numerous for the supreme to be able to hold them off."

"The timing couldn't be more lousy," grumbled the first officer. "With the Omega molecule at a critical state, the last thing we need is a full out war to break out."

Selphi was in agreement. "I do not believe this to be a coincidence. The Warrior Queen has many spies within Ergia's ranks. She undoubtedly is fully aware of the progress your scientist has made."

Wesley looked back out towards the most recent attack. The shockwave had been less severe as the habitat was farther away but the damage appeared worse. The dome itself had been cracked and he wondered if it would eventually crumble completely. Apparently the Warrior Queen had little scruples in tearing down what the Xenarth had built here, even if her ultimate aim was to remain on this world. But she would not stop at anything to get what she wanted, even if it meant to raze the settlements to the ground and rebuild it from scratch, probably killing countless Xenarth in the process.

Commodore Robert Wesley made his decision then and there. "This situation is getting out of control. We have to take action and do it now," he said and faced the Artisan Queen. "We have to get back to the lab. Take us to Ketteract."

Nelson Mandela, 2372

The plan to stay behind and get a chance to rescue her marooned away team had gone right out of the airlock. The stakes were no longer roughly fifty crewmembers surrounded by enemy forces. The moment those two Borg cubes had showed up out of seemingly nowhere, it had become every last person on *Agamemnon*, perhaps even every last crewmember on *Cuffe* as well. Not to mention what kind of destruction the Borg would be able to unleash on the galaxy would they be able to get their assimilated hands on the Omega molecule.

Cuffe had immediately altered course to head for the black hole in hopes to reach it before the Borg had a chance to catch up and *Agamemnon* was not far behind. Donners had decided to forgo the by-the-book docking maneuver and instead asked for a much riskier high-impulse landing in order to avoid the precious minutes it would take to carry out a more traditional docking maneuver. Timing had now become absolutely essential and any second was now a valuable commodity.

She had left the details of arranging the landing to Star-Wanderer while she remained in conference with her fellow starship captain who simply could no longer hide those worry lines now crossing his face.

"We've run the numbers three times already," Glover said who, perhaps for the first time since Maya had known the man with the infamous iron resolve, sounded almost defeated by the circumstances who had presented themselves. *"We're simply not going to make it. These cubes are travelling at a far higher rate of sub-light speed than we can match. We're already pushing our impulse engines to the absolute maximum and they're still gaining on us. We'll be intercepted about eight minutes before we reach the black hole."*

"Then Agamemnon has to hold them off," she said firmly. *"Buy you guys the time you need."*

Glover shook his head. *"I appreciate the offer but that's a suicide mission."*

"I'm well aware of that," she said. "But what choice do we have? If the Borg manage to catch up with you and secure the Omega molecule, we all lose."

"Maya, I've spent a lot of time studying the Borg. One cube is bad enough but going up against two in a single ship, you won't even make a dent."

She offered a little lopsided grin. "Don't underestimate Agamemnon."

But his face remained grim. "I'm not. I'm really not. Maybe you could keep one cube occupied for a few minutes but the other one will simply keep coming. Hell, considering how bad the Borg want this thing they might as well barrel right through you and it won't slow them down much. Tell her, Hugh."

The former Borg drone stood near Donners and when Glover made eye contact with the young man, he offered an almost mechanical nod. "He is correct. Your vessels have insufficient firepower to be able to delay them. In fact they may even ignore you completely as they won't see it as a significant threat considering the high reward of obtaining Particle 010."

"Damn it, there has to be something we can do?" she said, clearly frustrated by their lack of suggestions other than talking her out of her own.

Terrence Glover picked the worst time to—for the first time in his life—not to have any words to offer.

"There is an alternative you have not yet considered," Hugh said. "Turn both your ships around and fight."

Maya shot the former drone an incredulous look. "You just said we wouldn't stand a chance. That we have insufficient firepower."

"That is correct," he said and then looked straight at Glover. "However you have on board your ship all the power you need to be able to destroy both cubes."

It was Wayne Daystrom, also hovering around Donners, who was the first to make the connection. "The Omega molecule."

"You cannot be serious," Maya said. "You want us to weaponize Omega? Out of the question."

"You have seen what it has done to my own ship when the Xenarth used it with a similar purpose. It will stop the Borg," Hugh said.

Maya still shook her head. "And they destroyed their moon, not to mention destabilized subspace in this sector so much, it barely hangs by a thread now. Another release of Omega energy and the fabric of space keeping this system together may collapse completely."

"Besides, we have less than twenty minutes before the Borg catch up to us," said Glover who sounded skeptical of this plan himself. "How do you expect us to make the required modifications in that time?"

Daystrom stood suddenly. "It's possible," he said, pacing for a moment before looking up again. "It would probably blow out every single relay on *Cuffe* but if we were to tie in that resonance chamber into the EPS relay we could channel some of the Omega-generated power right into the main deflector for one incredibly effective energy discharge. If you shut down the warp engines and dump all your antimatter, you might even survive the outcome."

"Wait a second, I cannot believe we're considering this," said Donners as she regarded first her science officer and then Glover. "Putting aside for the moment the fact that this is in complete and utter violation of the Omega Directive, we're also talking about purposefully destabilizing subspace in this sector."

"Perhaps not," said Hugh. "I don't believe the Xenarth understood the side-effects of 010 when they first attempted to weaponize it and therefore took little to no precautions. The concern is that the excessive energy and radiation created as a byproduct of releasing Omega particles is likely to cause irreparable damage to subspace. There are theoretical ways in which to lessen this danger."

"We need a secondary outlet," Daystrom said, clearly in his element now and thinking along the same lines as the liberated Borg.

"Precisely."

"And we have one. *Agamemnon*."

Hugh offered a nod. "That could indeed work."

"Slow down," Donner said. "What does that mean, an outlet?"

The science officer turned to his captain. "Think of it like a huge lighting rod. What ever radiation or harmful energy the release of the particles will create, *Agamemnon* will catch and defuse it."

She began to shake her head but Daystrom was not done. "The dangers to ship and crew, I believe, would be minimal. The shields and hull will protect the crew from the radiation and again, if we take the right precautions, other than damaging power relays, *Agamemnon* has a good chance to survive this."

But Maya did not look convinced at all.

"Time is running out," said Glover on the screen, "and it's the best idea I've heard so far. I say we give this a shot. The alternative may as well be to

surrender Omega to the Borg and I think we can all agree that we'd rather sacrifice both our ships, perhaps even this system, before that happens."

Maya couldn't argue with that even if she absolutely hated the idea. Since being made aware of the existence of the Omega molecule she had come to realize what an incredible dangerous substances this was and how people in the past, including the Xenarth, had believed to be able to control it with disastrous consequences. The Federation's foremost molecular scientists had once thought they'd be able to bend Omega to their will and no doubt they had sounded just as excited and sure of themselves as Daystrom and Hugh did now. And yet they were no longer around to talk about the mistakes they had made.

"If we wish to proceed with this plan, we have to commence now," Hugh said. "There is much work to be done and I am not certain we will have sufficient time."

Daystrom nodded. "Captain, with your permission I'll beam directly to *Agamemnon* and work with Commander Chen to start making the modifications."

"I suggest I beam over to *Cuffe* to support their engineers there," said Hugh.

For a moment everyone was looking at Donners who was the only one who hadn't yet spoken and whose agreement was key to get their risky plan underway.

She nodded her head so slightly it was almost not perceivable at all. "Get started."

Hugh and Daystrom wasted no time and headed for the runabout's transporter to beam themselves to where they had to be.

Maya glanced back at *Cuffe's* captain. "If we pull this off and it works," she said, "that court martial I was talking to you about, we're both going to be the main attraction."

He offered a wry smile in response. "On the flipside, if it doesn't work, we won't need to worry about anything like that ever again."

Lure Mer'iab had his orders but for the first time in his life he could see no way of how to follow them.

It was an entirely foreign experience for him, one he had never before experienced, not as a young man serving the Thane's army, not as a cadet or a Starfleet officer.

And yet they had been simple enough: Stay alive.

As it turned out, there was absolutely nothing simple about them, considering the circumstances.

"Fall back, fall back," he shrieked to the forty-odd men which remained of Omega-Two. They had successfully eliminated every trace of the Omega molecule and fought off a Xenarth push on their position thanks to Sh'Fane and her team joining the battle at a critical juncture. They had blown the Omega generator and retreated towards their extraction point.

But things had deteriorated quickly after they had parted ways with Omega-Three and they soon found themselves cut-off from their escape route.

Re-routing to the captain's location had made sense until the Xenarth had taken that option away as well and they had found themselves surrounded by the enemy on all sides.

"There is no place to fall back to," Lieutenant Yuen said even as he fired his phaser rifle at the incoming Xenarth troops.

Mer'iab knew him to be right. Even if they could find a way around the enemy somehow, there was nowhere to go. All the shuttles had since departed. Mer'iab and his team had been left behind.

"We are too exposed here," said the security chief. "Sergeant, find us some cover," he said to the Andorian Marine who promptly nodded and then took two men to follow his orders. Mer'iab had recently developed a

newly found respect for Andorians, particularly those wearing Marine colors.

"A.J., watch out," Yuen shouted and then shoved the science officer aside when a lone Xenarth warrior had breached their perimeter and struck out at what had looked like an easy target of opportunity. Yuen managed to get her out of the razor-sharp spear's way but not quickly enough not to be impaled by it himself.

"Chi," Elborough cried out when she saw him getting struck by the Xenarth weapon and then scrambled back on her feet to get to the security officer.

But Mer'iab was at her side in an instant, holding her back with one arm and firing his rifle with the other which he unloaded with pinpoint accuracy, instantly killing the attacker.

"We're sitting duck out here," he said. "Where's my cover?"

"We've located a reinforced chamber about fifty meters down this corridor. We should be able to defend that position for a short time."

"I'll take it."

"Sir, I think you should know," said the Marine, "there is only one way in or out."

Mer'iab fully understood. Easy to defend but impossible to escape. "It's better than to be slaughtered out here. Move it people."

"What about Yuen?" A.J. said, even while still being held back by the Aurelian officer.

Mer'iab glanced at the Chinese man on the floor, his blood pooling around his body. A couple of corpsmen were already tending to him but judging by their grim faces, they were not having much success. "Can you move him?"

One of the Marines shook her head.

"Sir, the perimeter is collapsing," the sergeant called out.

Indeed the personnel which had been tasked to hold back the Xenarth was no longer able to slow them down. At least two men had already fallen.

"Fall back, fall back, now," Mer'iab shouted to his men and then looked at the corpsmen. "Bring him."

"No, he'll die," the science officer protested.

But Mer'iab didn't have time for this and he swooped up the young woman easily and carried her against her will as they began to move away from the incoming Xenarth soldiers.

They made their retreat to the chamber in mere minutes and with a limited number of casualties. And the sergeant had been right, the multi-level design and narrow entryway made it a good place to defend. He had no illusions that it would be a last stand. Escape seemed impossible. Already he could count a dozen wounded men which were no longer able to carry a weapon, including Lieutenant Yuen who had been a capable second-in-command.

Elborough had angrily freed herself from his grip once they had arrived at their destination and rushed over to where the corpsmen had placed him, fighting a desperate battle to keep him from bleeding out which had become even more of a challenge since they had been forced to transport him without proper precautions.

"Sergeant, I want you to set up people on all three levels and have them aim at the entrance. Shoot anything that comes through there and then find me a way to block it up."

The Andorian nodded sharply and went to carry out the orders.

He checked in on the most gravely injured of his men next only to find that the corpsmen had apparently already given up.

"Sorry, sir," she said. "There's nothing more we can do."

Elborough was sitting next to the dead security officer, sobbing. She was looking up at the tall Avian when he approached. "He was going to ... he was going to buy me a drink back on *Agamemnon*."

He considered her for a moment.

"None of us are getting out of here alive, are we?" she said between sobs.

Mer'iab knew the answer to that question but was unable to bring himself to say it. Then, with newfound purpose he turned to find the sergeant. "How much more explosives do we have?"

It took him only a few moments to check in with the men tasked to carry it. "We have four canisters of tri-cobalt left," he said. "Probably enough to blow this entire level."

Mer'iab nodded. "Give it to me."

"How much do you need, sir?"

"Give me all of it."

The Andorian's eyes widened with surprise but he quickly collected what he had been asked for and handed it over.

The security chief found the detonator and within moments he had the entire thing rigged to blow. He swung the explosive-filled backpack over his shoulder and headed for the only exit.

"What are you doing?" Elborough asked him after having watched him put together the tri-cobalt.

He stopped halfway to the exit and looked at her.

"What are you going to do?" she said again but obviously already aware what he was planning. "Don't."

But Mer'iab didn't respond. Instead he found the Andorian sergeant again. "You are in charge," he said and then dashed to the exit without another word.

He was immediately greeted by a hailstorm of weapons fire which he managed to dodge only barely and not without taking at least three shots, two of which grazed him and singed away parts of his flak vest and uniform underneath, one ripped right through his left wing and came dangerously close to hitting the backpack.

"Hold you fire," he shouted. "Hold you fire," he said again and then threw away his phaser rifle, causing it to clatter on the floor not too far away from where the Xenarth had taken up position.

They stopped for a moment and Mer'iab took that opportunity to jump into the open, fully aware that he was taking a huge gamble that they would shoot him down the moment they had a clear shot.

They didn't. Instead one of their numbers, likely an officer but Mer'iab was hard-pressed to see any kind of distinction, took a step closer.

The Aurelian loosened his backpack and dropped it on the floor between him and the Xenarth commander and close to where his rifle had landed. The bag opened up and a number of canisters rolled out. The Xenarth took a step backwards but when he realized that the canisters were idle he stopped once more.

"One of those things just took out that Omega generator in what can only be called an impressive display of destructive power," he said as he eyed his counterpart carefully. "Now consider what six of those things can do," he added and revealed the detonator in his right hand. He flipped open the safety cap and then pushed down on the dead-man's switch, arming the primers.

The Xenarth clearly understood and took another step backwards. Then he made eye contact with his winged opponent. "You detonate those explosives and you and your people will also die."

Mer'iab nodded.

"We are prepared to die for protecting what is ours," the insectoid said firmly.

Lure Mer'iab had his orders but for the first time in his life he could see no way of how to follow them.

Iota Crucis IV, 2267

As they traveled through the connecting tubes, a flood of Xenarth were heading the opposite direction and towards the domes which had been attacked. There had been other explosions since, spreading through the settlement and apparently closing in on Wesley and his away team from all sides.

But when the commodore looked upwards to find the dome on top of the mountain which allowed entry into the underground lab complex, he was relieved to find that it remained undamaged. However, he was fairly certain that it was only a matter of time until the ensuing violence would reach the lab and the unstable Omega molecules it housed.

Their train reached its destination and the away team, lead by Selphi rushed towards the elevator which took them into the underground complex.

Here the Xenarth were in a flurry of nervous activity. Where before things had looked like an organized, well-oiled machine, now the various scientists and workers were running back and forth with great urgency, stopping every few moments when another explosion rocked the cavern, before quickly carrying on.

Most were too busy or concerned to even notice the aliens had returned. And Wesley didn't pause on his way to find the main lab. Having recalled the way, he was leading the away team at a brisk and determined pace.

He only slowed once he had found the lab and was once more distracted for a short moment by the bright glowing Omega molecule chamber which had been left exposed and drowned the entire lab into flickering azure colors.

Wesley wasn't a scientist and he would have lied if he had said that he fully understood how Omega worked, but what he saw in the chamber

was great cause for concern nevertheless. Thousand of individual particles seemed to be swirling around each other in a seemingly chaotic pattern and pulsing with barely restrained energy almost as if they wanted to unleash their awesome power at any moment even if it meant their own destruction as well as, most likely, that of the entire planet, the solar system and beyond.

Ketteract was there of course and so was his Xenarth counterpart, Queen Chelra.

Both appeared to be working furiously on various machinery, every so often glancing up at the chamber but otherwise seemingly oblivious to the world around them.

The human scientist looked noticeably thinner and paler than the last time Wesley had seen him just a few days earlier. In fact he looked as if he had aged months in just hours and the commodore had to do a double take to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him, trying to convince him that this was in fact the same man who had arrived here with them.

Then he aimed a concerned look at Vincent.

The doctor shook his head. "He's not well, I told you."

The lab shook from a nearby explosion and most of the Xenarth paused for a moment, their antennae twitching anxiously and they looked around with concern. Ketteract and Chelra were not among those.

"Isfrequency at point eight terahertz. Point nine terahertz. It's working, it's working. I'm reading a measurable slow down in the molecules' electric charge. They are beginning to harmonize," Ketteract said, unable to keep the rising excitement out of his now raspy voice.

"You were right, Doctor," said Chelra as she studied the read-outs. "Calibrating the containment field to the molecule's resonance frequency is stabilizing the particles."

"Yes, yes," he said as if it was all a forgone conclusion already. "But it has also accelerated molecular breakdown. We need to adapt the isofrequency at a more rapid pace."

Wesley glanced towards the Andorian science officer. "What are they doing?"

Zha'Thara needed a few seconds to catch up. She kept her eyes on the molecule chamber where the particles' movements were becoming steadily less chaotic before she approached a nearby console to study the readings. "It's quite brilliant really. They're using the containment field designed to

keep the molecules from interacting with ordinary matter to force them to stabilize permanently.”

“Can it work?”

But Zha’Thara seemed too engrossed with what the displays were telling her to answer the commodore.

Wesley had no time for her inopportune appreciation. He stepped up right behind her. “Commander, can it work or not. I need to know.”

She turned to look at him and then back towards the chamber. “Maybe.”

He shook his head. “Not good enough.”

The Andorian made eye contact. “The theory is sound and the molecules are responding to it but—”

The room shook again and this time some of the ceiling lights blew out. A couple of large cabinets lining the walls toppled over and spilled their content all over the floor.

“But what?” Wesley barked, barely taking notice of the damage that had been done.

Zha’Thara looked around. “But not with this lab taking many more of these hits. This is an extremely precise procedure,” she said and nodded towards the two scientists. “If they make just one small mistake, calibrate the field to the wrong frequency, the molecules will rapidly become unstable and the containment field will fail.”

She didn’t have to put into words what would come after that.

“Can you shut it down?” Kutznetsov said.

She nodded. “I think so. Ketteract hasn’t spent much time over the last few days thinking about contingencies but the Xenarth actually have a backup plan in place which uses an inverse frequency to dissolve the molecules’ interatomic bonds. In short it would wipe them out of existence.”

“Get started on that, Commander,” Wesley said and directed a look at his first officer. “Assist her with whatever she needs. Mtolu, you’re with me.”

While the Andorian and the Bear went to work, and with most of the Xenarth far too distracted to realize what they were up to, Wesley and his security chief approached the two lead researchers.

“Isfrequency at one point two terahertz. I am having difficulties maintaining the frequency changes at this pace,” said Chelra as her delicate fingers raced across her computer workstation.

"We're almost there. Keep it up, keep it up. I can see it. I can see it stabilizing. My God, it's so beautiful." Ketteract's eyes were glued onto the containment chamber above as a smile spread over his face.

"Doctor. Doctor Ketteract."

The man didn't immediately react to Wesley calling out his name. "We're almost there. Almost there."

"Ketteract," Wesley said again, his voice loud enough to catch everyone's attention even over the now seemingly constant rumble coming from somewhere outside which seemed to indicate a steady bombardment.

"Commodore," he said and when he turned to look at him it was as if seeing him for the first time. "I didn't know you were here. Well, your timing couldn't be more perfect. You're just in time to bear witness to history in the making."

"Not today, I'm afraid. I need you to shut this down. Now."

His smile widened as if he had just heard a terrific joke. "You can't be serious. We are moments away from fully stabilizing Omega and giving the galaxy the most powerful energy source since the Big Bang."

"Either that or you'll cause another one. I cannot allow you to take that chance. Shut it down."

Realizing that the commodore wasn't jesting, Ketteract's face twisted into anger and indignation. "I refuse. You won't allow history to be made? I laugh at your small-minded ignorance, Commodore. I pity your fear and your limited imagination. Where you can see only cynicism and destruction, I see the beginning of a new era for —"

"Enough," Wesley said, unwilling to be delayed by the man's self-righteous tirade not to mention growing tired of his droning voice. He unclipped his phaser and Mtolo quickly followed suit. "You will stand down."

Ketteract's frown turned into a sarcastic laugh. "I should have expected something like this from you. You are a solider and a brute, Commodore, willing to use violence to suppress new ideas."

"My God, man, listen to yourself," said Vincent who had now joined Wesley and Mtolo. "You're trying to play God and the people willing to use violence against you are the very same who have invited us here. Open your eyes, we're in the middle of a civil war."

As if to emphasize his words, the lab was once again gripped by a shockwave of an explosion nearby. Judging by its intensity which knocked

out the remaining lights and many of the workstations, Wesley guessed that they had hit the facility directly.

The containment field, thankfully, was still holding for the moment.

"I cannot allow you to disrupt our progress," said the Scholar Queen and stood next to Ketteract, her lower arms determinedly crossing in front of her body in a sign of defiance.

"I do not need your approval," said Wesley. "Commander, how are we doing?"

Zha'Thara looked up from her console for just a brief moment. "Almost ready, sir. I have successfully calibrated the inverse frequency and we are ready to apply it to the containment chamber."

"No, you cannot do this," Ketteract cried and moved towards the Andorian. He was stopped in his tracks by the burly first officer who stood in-between them with his phaser pointed at the scientist.

"I'm not going to lie. I've been wanting to shoot you from the moment we've met," he said with a smirk. "Please give me an excuse."

"Commander, initiate the process," Wesley said.

"You will do no such thing."

The Xenarth streaming into the lab moved faster than Wesley would have expected them to. Half a dozen armed soldiers quickly surrounded him and his away team, pointing their weapons straight at their heads.

The soldiers wore the insignia of the Cleric caste and wasted no time to push Zha'Thara away from the console before relieving the away team of their phasers.

Queen Ergia, the supreme of the Xenarth Colony had been just a step behind her soldiers. "Expect to be punished severely for this betrayal, Commodore," she said and then directed her large compound eyes towards her fellow queen. "And I am disappointed in you, Selphi. You have turned against your own people. A transgression I will not soon forget."

"Half your people have risen up against you, my Queen," said Selphi who had stood by quietly while Wesley and company had made their move against Ketteract and the Omega molecule. "They are attacking us while we speak and all of this because of the unnatural power we are trying to unleash here. I beseech you, do the right thing and end this while we have the chance."

The supreme considered Selphi for a moment, then let her glance wander across the lab, taking in the now herded Starfleet officers, Ketteract

and the Scholar Queen before finally finding the containment chamber and the eagerly pulsing particles within.

"I shall pray that the All-Mother will show forgiveness in the light of your betrayal, Selphi, because I shall offer none," she said and focused on Ketteract. "Quickly, my friend. Finish what you have started. Open the gate to Xendaru and let us all bask in the unending bliss of the God-Queen."

"Listen to me, Ketteract, don't do this," said Wesley. "You are a scientist. You know that this is no longer a controlled environment. This is a warzone. One mistake, one more errant explosion and you doom us all. Don't try to—" he was cut off harshly when one of the guards struck him across the head with his weapon, slinging him to the floor.

Vincent was at this side momentarily. "I wouldn't recommend antagonizing them," he said as he used his medical sensor to check him out, waving the saltshaker-sized device above his now bleeding forehead. "Your skull isn't thick enough to take many blows like that."

"Trying to save the universe here, Doctor. That's worth a broken skull or two."

But it didn't appear to matter much. Ketteract stared at the downed Starfleet captain for only a moment before swiftly making up his mind again and turning back to his workstation. "Chelra, quickly, re-modulate the containment field. We can still stabilize them if we move fast enough."

The Scholar Queen didn't hesitate and promptly stepped back to her station. "Containment field at one point three terahertz."

Another explosion, this one seemingly from somewhere inside the underground facility, caused most of the anxious Xenarth to look towards the doors leading to the lab.

Queen Ergia ignored it completely. "Work fast, my children, work fast. The heretics stand by the gates but the All-Mother shall protect us all as our mission is just and our success preordained."

"God, how I hate religious fanatics," said Vincent as he cleaned up Wesley's wound. "They're as obsessed with their faith as they are with hearing their own voice."

But the commodore was not paying it any attention. Instead he turned to his own people. "We have to make a move," he whispered urgently, hoping the guards wouldn't notice. "As soon as we get another one of those explosions, I want you to engage. Commander, you, the doctor

and Nealo create a distraction. Talana you try and get back to that control station to activate that pulse. I'll go after Ketteract."

There were quick nods all around.

"We're losing power to the primary reactor. It must have been damaged. I cannot keep up the frequency shifts and the containment field is beginning to fluctuate," cried Chelra, her voice taking on a high-pitched squeak.

"Compensate, compensate. Switch to auxiliary," Ketteract barked, now feverishly working on his own station.

In the chamber above the movements of the particles appeared to have sped up. The previously established order was turning back into chaos, the steady pulses were turning into angry flashes.

"Can't you see, you cannot stabilize it anymore. Shut it down before it's too late," Wesley shouted.

"My Queen, he speaks the truth," Selphi said, trying to close in on the supreme but quickly apprehended by her personal guard. She struggled with them for a moment. "Listen to them and take action before it is too late. Before you become the supreme to oversee the end of our people."

"Faith," she said. "You must have faith. The All-Mother awaits." But she didn't sound quite as convinced as she had just moments before as it became more and more difficult to argue with the visual evidence before her very eyes. She took a step towards the scientists. "How close are we? When will it be done?"

But neither Ketteract nor Chelra had the time to provide a response.

"Isfrequency now at point nine terahertz. We are beginning to lose containment. Auxiliary power is not sufficient to compensate."

"It will be. It has to be or we'll—" Ketteract couldn't even say it as he looked up to see the Omega molecules above him now seemingly laughing in his face for his pathetic attempts to try and rein them in and make them dance according to his beat. They were wild and untamable, ready to break out of their artificial prison and unleash their awesome power on an utterly unprepared universe.

"What have we done?"

Agamemnon, 2372

Maya Donners and the rest of her team had beamed off the *Nelson Mandela*, leaving it behind as a necessary sacrifice to speed and efficiency and if the Borg didn't destroy it in their pursuit, and if they were still around to do so, they planned on recovering it later. The fate of the runabout, of course, was the last of their worries at the moment.

Amaya had beamed directly onto her bridge and both Texx and Vej were immediately on their feet when they saw their captain appear, her hair dirty and disheveled, her uniform torn in places and her body covered in scrapes and cuts. She had assured them that she was alright but that hadn't stopped her first officer from calling Doctor Rass onto the bridge.

The main screen had been split into four rectangular sections. Glover and his bridge on the *Cuffe* were displayed in the top left inset. To his right was a view of one of his cargo bays where the Omega resonance chamber had been set up and where N'Saba, Pedro Rojas and Hugh were hard at work implementing their latest plan. In the lower left quadrant was *Agamemnon's* main engineering section where Commander Chen and Daystrom were making their own preparations while to their right was the reason everybody was on edge. Two Borg cubes racing to catch up with the fleeing Starfleet ships. According to a timer underneath the imposing image, they had less than fifteen minutes until the Borg were within weapons range. They had gained a little precious time by diverting all available power to their sub-light engines but Maya already feared that it still wasn't enough.

Within fifteen minutes they were either all dead or assimilated by the hands of the Borg, or quite possibly, wiped out of existence by collapsed subspace brought on by unleashing a seemingly unstable and uncontrollable Omega molecule powered weapon.

"Don't these kind of ideas usually go through years of testing before anyone even considers using them in a real world application?" said Vej

who had been the first one to utter skepticism after learning of their upcoming plan. He had kept his voice purposefully low enough so as not to disturb the scientists and engineers hard at work on both ships.

Maya nodded sharply but didn't look his way, instead keeping her eyes glued to the various sections on the main viewer and that unforgiving timer, counting down the seconds to the moment she had hoped against hope to avoid.

"We've seen the Xenarth use something similar just a few hours ago," said Texx. "They destroyed themselves in the process but we've made precautions to limit the damage. Both to ourselves as well as to subspace," said the first officer and doing an admirable job at sounding confident and reassuring but judging by the look on the telepathic counselor's face, he wasn't buying the Bolian's poise, probably seeing it for what it really was. An attempt to dispel the legitimate uncertainty among the crew.

"Right, and these are the same people who've studied the Omega molecule for hundreds of years longer than we have," said DeSoto from the helm, apparently also seeing through the first officer's words.

"Bobby," Allenby hissed, shooting him a withering look. "Zip it."

"In my people's defense," said Queen Ket who had also returned to the bridge to witness the coming showdown with the Borg. "We have only recently re-emerged from a long period during which most research into the Xendaru particle or most other technology was either frowned upon or strictly forbidden. Much knowledge has been lost to us during those dark times."

Vej glanced at the Xenarth female. "From what I understand, the Federation has also suppressed any study into Omega and for good reason. Knowledge can be a very dangerous thing. Unfortunately, a little bit of knowledge can be even worse."

The bridge settled back into an uncomfortable silence while for the next few minutes only the voices of the busy engineers on *Cuffe* and *Agamemnon* could be heard as they spoke in rapid-fire dialogue which sounded almost like Klingonese to the uninitiated.

It wasn't until Terrence Glover barked, "*Report*," with less than six minutes left on the timer that the relative silence was broken again.

"*It's not going to work*," said Pedro Rojas without preamble and perhaps even sounded a little relieved at the prospect of not having to attempt to initiate a sequence of events which could destabilize subspace for light-years or worse.

"We can fire the weapon," said the lupine N'Saba, "but we simply have no way of controlling the resulting and uncontrolled release of Omega particles. We might end up dooming the entire sector. Maybe even the quadrant."

Maya got onto her feet in one swift motion, her face turned into a frown, making it clear that she was not happy with that statement. "A couple of minutes ago Commander Chen suggested the use of *Agamemnon's* warp core as an energy conduit by reversing the polarity of the reaction chamber and allowing it to harmlessly channel the residual Omega molecules. Hugh agreed that this could theoretically work. Why are we not pursuing this avenue any further?" she said, making it plainly obvious, not only that she had paid very close attention to every word that had been exchanged by the engineers and the scientists on both vessels but also that she still was an engineer by trade herself.

She was greeted by blank faces initially, perhaps a little surprised by her poignant question.

Chen was the first to respond. *"While this is a feasible solution to our problem on how to handle the excess Omega molecules being released by the weapon, we simply do not have the time to carry out the necessary modifications to the warp core and reactor assembly."*

The others quickly nodded in agreement.

"How much time would you need? And be precise," she said.

There wasn't an immediate response.

"How much time, gentlemen?"

"If we get every available man on it," said Daystrom. *"Maybe seven, eight minutes. But that's an optimistic estimate."*

Maya glanced at the timer. Five minutes until the Borg made contact. Everybody understood that once they were in weapons range, the damage the Borg would be able to cause in their initial attack would more than likely nullify their chances to safely deploy a weapon which was already unstable in the first place.

She looked back at Daystrom and Chen. "Get started and use whoever and whatever you need to get it done in seven. I'll get you two more minutes," she said and immediately headed off into her ready room without saying another word to anyone.

To their credit Daystrom and Chen didn't dally and immediately attended to what needed to be done, fully aware that time was now their second biggest enemy.

Terrence Glover stared at Texx and the remaining bridge crew on *Agamemnon* with an asking expression. *"Anyone want to tell me how exactly she plans on doing this?"*

The empty faces made it clear that they didn't have the slightest idea.

Iota Crucis IV, 2267

As Wesley had expected there was another explosion and he and his team had been ready for it, seizing the opportunity the moment the ground under their feet shook and the guards were distracted.

Wesley punched the nearest guard right in the face, hitting him square in his large compound eye which caused the insectoid to utter a loud shriek of pain before going down.

Kutznetsov, Mtolu and Vincent followed suit not a moment later, attacking their guards and trying to keep them engaged while Zha'Thara hurried past them and towards the workstation she had already set up to shut down the molecules.

The commodore went after Ketteract and wrestled the surprised and unprepared scientist to the ground before he could try and counteract whatever it was Talana was going to do.

The Starfleet away team had moved so fast, they had failed to realize that the explosion that had given them this opportunity had actually come from inside the lab itself. The heavy doors had been blown off, flattening a number of Xenarth scientists who had been unlucky enough to stand close to them.

The few guards who had not been busy with the Starfleeters turned to engage the soldiers who were now streaming into the lab.

It was not a fair fight and it was over almost before it had began.

The Cleric caste guards were no match for the better trained Soldier caste Xenarth who fired upon everyone who offered resistance and then quickly moved to surround the lab.

And while their main target may have been their fellow Xenarth of other castes, they were equally at odds with their alien visitors.

Zha'Thara found herself with another Xenarth weapon pointed at her face for the second time and just before she had the chance of initiating the

pulse which she had hoped would bring an end to the Omega molecules threatening to breach their containment field. "You've got to be kidding me," she said as she raised her hands in surrender and took a step backwards when the Xenarth soldier practically prodded her with his weapon.

Wesley found himself in a similar situation but this time found that Ketteract, Chelra and even the supreme were being detained in the same manner. He quickly found the leader of the attacking force. The Warrior Queen he had already met once before had led her troops personally and now stood victorious in the middle of the lab, carefully scrutinizing her surroundings.

"Queen Quelphi," he said and tried to approach her without success as the soldiers surrounding him used their spear-like energy weapons to keep him at bay.

"Ah yes, the alien interloper," she said and she looked at him. "I warned you to leave this system when we first spoke but foolish minds overrode my decision. You will come to regret not having heeded my warnings."

Wesley dismissed all that with a wave of his hand. "We don't have time for any of this," he said and pointed towards the containment chamber which was now steadily growing brighter by the second as the containment field flared, struggling to keep up with the molecules within. "The particles are about to become unstable and the containment field will fail. You have to allow my people to shut it down or we're all going to die."

His voice was stern and genuine enough apparently to give Quelphi pause. But she didn't take any action as she took her time to consider the situation.

"Listen to me," Wesley said. "This is your battle right here. This is what you've been fighting against. To preserve your people and save them from the supreme's arrogant pursuit of a power she barely understands. Let us stop it now or you and your war will have been for nothing."

Quelphi jerked her head slowly in a Xenarth equivalent of a small nod. "Do what you must then."

Wesley didn't waste time. "Talana!"

The woman nodded and when the guard didn't move, she simply pushed the weapon aside. "Out of my way," she said and attended to the workstation.

The Warrior Queen signaled the guard to stand down before he could take punitive actions.

"No, no I will not allow it," the supreme screeched, freed herself from her own guards and rushed towards the Andorian science officer. "The God-Queen will not allow it. Her will shall be done."

Ketteract decided to spring into action at the exact same moment. With the guards distracted by the supreme's sudden attack, he slipped his as well to get to his computer station at which he had been tirelessly working on.

"He's overriding my shutdown sequence," the science officer said as she worked the console.

Wesley didn't know where to turn first.

Zha'Thara didn't see the Xenarth supreme coming quickly enough. By the time the Andorian realized that she was bearing down on her, it was already too late. The raging Egia reached out for the smaller woman and practically tossed her out of the way. Zha'Thara hit a nearby console with a sickening crunch and remained on the floor with her neck bent at an awkward angle.

Vincent was at her side within a heartbeat. The doctor knelt next to the woman but within moments the grim diagnosis was in. He turned to find the commodore only to shake his head. "She's dead."

The news hit Wesley like a sledgehammer and as much as he wanted to deal with the Andorian's tragic and untimely demise first, he knew he couldn't afford to. Not with Ketteract back at the Omega containment chamber's main controls again. And the Warrior Queen's guards were moving so dammed slow now that one of his own had been killed and all their lives were suddenly up for grabs.

Ketteract had of course taken no notice of anything around him other than the bright, twinkling lights of the Omega molecule above. "It's done, it's done," he cried as he remained completely transfixed on the containment chamber. "Behold the greatest power the universe has ever seen. And it is stable."

The room was now entirely flooded by the bright azure light of the molecules, too bright, it turned out, for most of the Xenarth who were forced to cover their large eyes.

But it remained just bearable enough for humans and Wesley harshly pushed Ketteract aside to get to the controls, even though he was fairly certain that he had no idea what do to with them.

The scientist fell to the floor but that didn't stop him from laughing, almost like a madman. "Too late, Commodore. Too late. It's done, can't you see? I've tamed Omega. I have created endless power where there was nothing."

"You're no god."

"God?" Ketteract said, considering this for a moment. "You're right. I'm not God," he added and pulled himself back onto his feet. "I have surpassed God."

Only one problem: The bright light was gaining intensity by the second. "This does not look stable to me," said Wesley and looked down to find a control, anything that would allow him to stop what he feared would happen next.

"No, no, this can't be. It was stable. I had it stabilized."

"Damn it, Doctor, this is not stable," Wesley yelled at the man. "Shut it down. Shut it down, now."

But the scientist, so assured of himself just moments ago, looked terrified now, his face turning completely blank. "I ... I can't."

Wesley turned to face the computer station again, determined to do whatever needed to be done. But he already knew he couldn't do it alone. Ketteract clearly was no longer able to assist, Zha'Thara was dead and the Scholar Queen was cowering in a corner, crying like most of the Xenarth as their sensitive compound eyes seemed to burn from the steady increasing brightness.

Wesley looked up once more and just in time to see something else happening. An energy spike of sorts shot out of the chamber and hit him square in the chest, instantly knocking the air out of his lungs and flinging him backwards across the room until he came to a rest, propped up by a console behind him.

The pain was indescribable and yet he managed to look up once more. He immediately wished he hadn't. A blinding flash of light nearly took his eyesight. Time seemed to slow and he watched curiously as Xenarth and the remaining members of his landing party turned and tried to get away from the containment chamber in seemingly slow motion.

The room had lost all color and everyone and everything had turned into nothing more than bright and blurry outlines as if the entire world had been whited-out.

He felt the shockwave pushing him against the floor which he thought to be odd because it seemed to annihilate anything in its path. In

some inexplicable manner Robert Wesley remained even as he watched on helplessly as everything else around him turned into dust.

Borg Cube 321, 2372

“No trace of Particle 010 detected on planetoid 023475-233G. Presence of Particle 010 now confirmed on board of Federation starship, USS *Cuffe*, designation NCC-73006. Changing course to intercept,” a thousand voices within the seemingly endless cube echoed as one.

“Second Federation starship detected,” the voices thundered again as if a million drones were having a conversation with themselves. “Classification USS *Agamemnon*, NCC-76210. No traces of Particle 010 detected on board. Vessel expected to offer resistance.”

“Irrelevant. Primary objective: Secure Particle 010. All other objectives are irrelevant.”

“Diverting all system resources to achieve primary objective.”

And so the two Borg cubes continued on their course to intercept the two Starfleet ships with a single and unwavering purpose.

“Contact with primary objective imminent,” the Borg voices said as one. “Federation ships showing no indication of activated offensive and defensive systems. Prepare to secure Particle 010 and terminate Federation vessels.”

But then the first signs of something amiss didn’t escape the minds of the countless drones linked into every single instrument of their massive vessels. “Particle 010 energy build-up detected on NCC-73006.”

“Irrelevant. Expected conclusion of energy build-up will not take place before time index 02334. Interception will take place at time index 02331. Proceed with primary objective.”

And so it was understood that whatever last minute ploy Starfleet had tried to engage in to keep the desired super-molecule out of the Borg’s grasp was destined to fail. Whatever their plan it would come too late. The Borg were supremely confident in their own cold and meticulous calculations. *Cuffe* would be intercepted and secured long before she and her fellow escort had a chance to mount any kind of defense.

Victory, for the Borg, was all but assured.

Agamemnon, 2372

"Sixty seconds until Borg enter weapons range," said Allenby, her voice strained and unable to hide her anxiety and fear of potentially being just moments away from being assimilated. Considering that both *Agamemnon* and *Cuffe* were sitting duck, without weapons or shields to protect them against the coming onslaught, the fear was not at all misplaced.

"Reading increasing energy levels on both cubes," said Texx who in Mer'iab's absence had moved to the tactical station behind the captain. Even the usually cool Bolian couldn't quite keep his voice from breaking up slightly.

"We're almost there. Maybe another couple of minutes," said chief engineer Rojas from one of the insets on the main screen. He was feverish at work along with Hugh, N'Saba and a host of other engineers and science officers, none of them paying attention to the impending disaster that was to befall them all.

"You don't have a couple of minutes," Glover growled from his bridge. Maya could tell that the starship captain was doing an admirable job of pretending he wasn't concerned or scared for that matter. Regardless what would happen within the next minute or so, the man was not going to be shaken and she admired that about him a great deal.

"The modifications to the warp core assembly are complete," said Chen, *"but we need to recalibrate the dilithium matrix before we can channel the Omega molecule residue."*

"No time for that," Daystrom responded, working alongside the insectoid he never once looked up while he furiously tapped away at an engineering console.

"He is correct," said Hugh from *Cuffe*. *"We must commence the Omega sequence now or we will not be successful."*

Terrence Glover glanced at his counterpart on the *Agamemnon* and noticed her nod to him. It was her ship on the line as well. If the weapon

didn't fire, both would be easy pickings for the Borg. If the weapon failed, if the excess Omega radiation tore through *Agamemnon* because of a mechanical or calibration error, the ship and its crew would almost be instantly wiped out of existence.

"Do it," said Glover. "Do it now."

N'Saba, apparently having drawn the short straw, was the man ultimately responsible for pulling the trigger. To start a chain reaction to unleash the most powerful force known to man which could not only spell their own destruction but those of countless others throughout the sector and change the face of the galaxy forever if it accidentally destroyed subspace. "*Omega sequence initiated.*"

But Daystrom on *Agamemnon*, who was closely monitoring everything that happened on both ships, already shook his head. "*It's too slow,*" he said with frustration plain as day. "*The resonance chamber is synthesizing the molecules too slowly.*"

"*There is no way to accelerate the process,*" Hugh said even as his focus remained on the resonance chamber itself and the molecules within it as if his impending death no longer mattered now that he was so close to witnessing the miracle of Particle 010.

On *Agamemnon's* bridge where everyone could see and hear absolutely everything that was taking place on both vessels along with the ominous visual of those two massive cubes closing in, the tension was about to boil over.

Both DeSoto and Allenby turned from their stations to look at their captain, their eyes almost pleading for new orders, something, anything that would give them a fighting chance against what was to come.

But Maya Donners refused to give any and her young crew had never looked more desperate than it did at that moment.

She managed to remain calm, sitting cross-legged in her chair, trying hard to exude confidence and strength. And she found encouragement when she glanced to her left where Vej looked back at her with eyes mirroring that same confidence as if to tell her that he trusted her, that he didn't have a doubt that they would somehow manage to defeat these miserable odds and survive the coming storm.

Nobody bothered to provide a countdown. The timer on the main view screen was obvious to all as it raced towards zero and the moment the Borg would engage the two totally unprotected starships.

Thirty seconds left.

Then twenty-five.

Twenty seconds.

"Captain, new contact, one-seven-five mark three-five," said Texx from tactical, almost shouting now. "Four hundred thousand kilometers."

Every set of eyes focused on the busy main viewer not realizing at first that it would reveal nothing of consequence in its present configuration.

"On screen," Maya said.

And then they saw it.

"It's the *Khazara*!" DeSoto all but yelled out.

The majestic green warbird shimmered into existence behind and above the two cubes. But for all its imposing size it looked nothing more than toy compared to the humongous Borg ships.

The size discrepancy didn't stop the warbird from unleashing its awesome firepower at near point-blank range. And it was an impressive firework of destructive energy. Clearly Toreth had channeled every last drop of energy into her offensive systems, unleashing dozens of torpedoes, disruptor blasts, lances of red-hot phased energy and at least one or two weapon systems nobody on *Agamemnon* had ever seen before.

It caught the Borg completely off guard, too focused had they been on obtaining the sought after particle, they had never considered or prepared for an attack by a cloaked vessel from the rear.

And while the impressive display of destructive energy was nowhere sufficient to destroy either cube, it was more than enough to force them both to lose forward momentum, the assault clearly having damaged their abilities to maintain high impulse speeds.

Agamemnon's bridge crew erupted into a loud cheer when the timer indicating the approaching Borg ships adjusted upwards, giving them precious and desperately needed seconds.

A subdued tone from one of the captain's chair armrests caused Maya to drop her gaze onto its display to find a simple message she had received via a dedicated and untraceable signal: *That's all I can give you. You're on your own now. Good luck. T.*

Maya allowed herself a tiny smirk. It was, she hoped, all the time they had needed.

On the screen the warbird turned sharply and shimmered out of existence again before either Borg cube could even consider taking aim at the inconvenient interloper.

"Never thought I'd say this but thank god for the Romulans," said Allenby.

"*Omega sequence completed,*" N'Saba's voice said over the still open comm channel to Cuffe. "*The weapon is engaging in five ... four ... three ...*"

Donners held on to her armrests so tightly, her knuckles turned white. "All hands, brace yourselves," she said, knowing full well that whatever came next, be it their own destruction, the end of the universe as they knew it or, one hoped, the successful deployment of the most destructive weapon ever created, it wouldn't be painless.

"*Two ... one ... deploying.*"

Maya wasn't sure what she had been expecting. Something similar perhaps to what they had experienced when the Xenarth had attempted to unleash their own version of the Omega weapon which had fatefully destroyed their own moon in the process. A shockwave that would turn the ship literally inside out and blow every last relay and energy conduit to smithereens.

Something on an apocalyptic scale perhaps that left absolutely nothing behind afterwards. Something right out of Percy Bysshe Shelley: '*My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!*'

The irony of it all struck her too late. Destroy the galaxy to save it? Was that what they were doing now? Had it all come down to this?

That expected shockwave never came.

Instead something entirely different and unanticipated happened and Maya would be at a loss to make sense of it all after it was over.

A single lighting-like power surge emerged from seemingly nowhere and hit her directly in the chest with such force, she gasped in pain and tears shot into her eyes.

Then she noticed that the timer on the screen which had counted down to their Borg encounter had stopped entirely which in itself of course was odd but was most likely explained by a system malfunction caused by the Omega weapon.

What couldn't be explained as easily was that everyone and everything began to move backwards. At first slowly as if in slow motion but then it jumped to fast rewind and only went faster until it was nothing more than a blur of backwards movement which soon passed the point, she thought, at which she had taken command of the ship. It passed the point the ship had even been built, it passed the point the shipyard around it had

been constructed and it didn't stop. It went back to before mankind reached for the stars, before mankind, before life on Earth and before Earth and the sun. Before the universe was crated.

And yet Maya Donners never seemed to move from where she sat, watching all this unfold as a spectator somehow entirely removed from the process of time winding down on itself.

A flash of searing white light forced her to bring up her hands to shield her eyes. When it was gone and she could risk removing her hands, time was moving again. But this time forward again, at the same head spinning pace and through the exact same steps as it had before until it slowed again and crept back towards normalcy.

When time finally returned to its regular pace she quickly realized that she was not at all where she was supposed to be. She wasn't back on *Agamemnon* and as far as she could tell she wasn't even in outer space. The place seemed unfamiliar to her but appeared to be a laboratory of some kind. When the many figures going urgently back and forth slowed down to their normal speed and their shapes were no longer blurred, she immediately recognized them as Xenarth.

She thought she was back on Zenith, on the moon orbiting Iota Crucis IV. The design of the architecture and the technology seemed undeniably similar except for the fact that she couldn't remember ever having set foot into any room that had looked quite like this one.

The Omega generator mounted up high inside one of the walls looked distinctly different, less advanced than the ones she and her team had nearly died in their desperate effort to shut down. The bright blue, angrily burning molecules inside of it were unquestionably of the same variety however. And they looked a hell of lot less contained than the ones she had found on Zenith.

Time had only just returned to its normal progression when a lot of things happened at once.

A Xenarth attacked an Andorian looking woman without provocation, tossing her out of the way and causing her to land so harshly that there was no doubt that she had died on impact.

Everyone in the room scurried, either trying to get to the dead Andorian or trying to apprehend the rogue Xenarth.

But before anyone had a chance to do much of anything, the molecules within the containment chamber went completely haywire, brightening the room so much, it was painful to keep her eyes open.

A sudden energy burst from the chamber hit a man square in the chest and pushed him almost across the entire room. Donners recognized the lightning like bolt and immediately touched her own chest where she had been hit in very similar fashion.

Then a shockwave tore the resonance chamber to pieces and everything and everyone around it along with it. The world turned into nothing but whiteness.

“Who are you?”

Donners spun around to see that she was not alone. A human man stood just a few meters away. He was of average height, maybe in his mid to late fifties with salt and pepper hair and the straight posture and bearing of a person of great authority and responsibility. He looked uncannily familiar. It was without a doubt the man who had just been hit by the energy spike.

“Captain Amaya Donners,” she said. “And who are you? What is this place?”

The man had a quick look around but if he saw the same thing she did, there was really nothing at all for him to find. “Funny, I was just going to ask you.”

She took a step closer and recognition dawned on her. She had seen this man before in pictures and visual logs. “My god, you’re Robert Wesley.”

He seemed surprised at hearing his name and considered her suspiciously. “How do you know my name?”

Donners couldn’t believe it. Not only was she meeting a Starfleet legend, much worse she seemed to have somehow travelled back in time. Or at least she thought she had. It hadn’t been bad enough that on her first mission as a captain she had to deal with the most powerful force known in existence, trying to avert an intergalactic incident with the Romulans and facing off the Borg, now she found herself in a potential Temporal Prime Directive situation as well.

“I ... “ Words suddenly failed her. If she was indeed in her past she was bound by Starfleet protocol not to endanger the timeline by revealing any information pertaining to the future.

“And you appear to be human,” he continued. “You said you were a captain but I don’t recognize your uniform. What is it you are a captain of? What organization do you belong to?”

Maya's head was pounding all of a sudden and since she had realized that she was facing a Starfleet legend, potentially in his time, she couldn't be sure of anything right now. "It's difficult to explain," she said. "All I can say for now is that I'm on your side."

He continued to study her carefully, appraising her with great scrutiny. Then he nodded slowly. "I believe you."

She offered him a smile. "Thanks."

"But it doesn't help to explain any of this," he said and looked around again. "Where we are or what this place is," he said and then looked back at her. "Unless you have some answers."

"I wish I did," she said. "But I'm as clueless as you. One moment I'm in my chair, the next I find myself here."

"Something happened just before I got here. I was exposed to a powerful energy. In fact it looked to me as if it had unleashed, as if it destroyed everything in its path."

"Yes," she said. "I saw that."

There was suspicion in his eyes again. "You saw it? How?"

"I don't know how. But we were trying to do something similar. We were releasing the Omega molecule to fight off the ... an enemy. There was an energy spike which hit me right in the chest. Then I saw things, including what you just described and the next thing I know I find myself here with you."

"Ketteract called it the Omega molecule," said Wesley thinking. "It's clearly what is connecting us."

Donners smirked despite herself.

"Something funny, Captain?"

"Sorry, I'm just relieved, I guess. For a moment I thought I was dead and this is the afterlife."

"Relax, I'm pretty sure I'm not your maker," he said with a tiny smile.

"You wouldn't be the first starship captain I've mistaken for an omnipotent being today. But you're right," she said. "Somehow the Omega molecule did this."

"Bringing us together? But why?"

She turned away from Wesley, suddenly remembering something Wayne Daystrom had tried to tell her on the Xenarth facility. "Could it be?"

The commodore took a couple of steps to follow her. "Could what be?"

Maya turned back around. "My science officer seemed convinced that the Omega particles aren't mere molecules but that there is a greater intelligence at work. He seemed to think that it is potentially the very same intelligence which led to the creation of the universe in the first place."

The commodore looked stunned by that revelation.

"Heavy stuff, I know. But never mind his theories about the creation of all existence. Let's just assume for a moment that he was right about the intelligence part. If that's the case then maybe this wasn't some sort of fluke or accident. Maybe somehow the Omega molecule got us together on purpose."

It took Wesley a couple of seconds to digest all that. "I've heard of creatures with seemingly limitless powers, of travels back into time and of ancient Greek gods living in outer space so I won't dismiss this notion just because it sounds unbelievable."

She smirked again. "You're familiar with James Kirk's logs, I see."

He offered a small smile of his own. "So, let's say you're right. What's the purpose of bringing us together like this?"

Donners didn't have an immediate answer to that question.

"From what I saw," he continued. "Omega was in the process of annihilating the galaxy. Do you think that perhaps it is trying to undo that?"

"It's as good a theory as any."

He nodded. "It's certainly what we should try to do. The question is how?"

Not a second later their surroundings disappeared again and they found themselves back in the Xenarth underground lab on Iota Crucis IV. They stood together to one-side and watched on Wesley – another version of him – shoving aside Ketteract to get to the controls even while the seemingly crazed scientist told him that his efforts would come too late.

The moment passed as quickly and unexpectedly as it had come and both Wesley and Donners found themselves back in that bright and endless whiteness where they had first met.

"Okay, what the hell was that?" she said after she'd been able to catch her breath from the surprising change of venues.

"We went back," said a similarly astounded Robert Wesley. "We went back to the lab for a moment just before those molecules became unstable and escaped their containment field."

"How?"

He considered that before responding. "I was thinking how I wished I could have gotten to Ketteract faster. It was a quick thought, that's all."

"There's our answer," she said. "Whatever this place is, it's allowing us to go back and perhaps change things. Stop those molecules from destroying who knows what."

He nodded in agreement. "Yes, I think you're right," he said. "But it only lasted a moment. Not enough time to change things."

"Could it be a matter of focus? You said you were merely thinking about stopping Ketteract in passing. What if you tried to focus on that thought, held on to it longer? Perhaps that would take us back again and give us more time to change something."

Wesley grinned. "If wishes were horses? Is that it?"

"I think it's worth a shot."

"Agreed."

"Hang on," she said quickly and then stepped closer to Wesley. "We don't know what's going to happen or if we are going to get another chance at this," she added and then stuck out her hand. "I just wanted to say that it was a great honor to meet you, sir."

He took her hand without hesitation. "Call me Bob. And the honor was all mine. Looks like they still make Starfleet captains out of the right stuff in the future."

She aimed an astounded look at the man.

"Oh, I figured it out alright," he said. "Wasn't all that difficult, really."

Donners offered a proud smile.

"Now take a step back, just in case. Thoughts can be a dangerous thing."

She gave him a firm nod and did as she had been told.

Wesley closed his eyes.

And just like that they were back in that lab on Iota Crucis. For Wesley, familiar surroundings he had last seen and lived mere minutes earlier, for Donners, nothing more than log entries she had read about and something that had taken place over a hundred years ago.

Robert Wesley stood next to her near a wall and watched as he and his Starfleet team were being surrounded by Xenarth warriors even while the ubiquitous Omega molecules continued to pulsate ominously and towards the inevitable moment when that containment field would no longer hold back their awesome power. Donners couldn't help wonder about Daystrom's claim of an intelligence at work within those bright, powerful lights. And if their theory was true that Omega was somehow responsible for this strange second chance at stopping a catastrophe before it could change the galaxy forever. Didn't that mean that Omega was helpless to stop itself from becoming unstable? Was it not just Wesley who needed help but was it Omega itself?

She decided that there was no time to ponder any of those questions. Nobody in the room seemed to have noticed her and the other Wesley appear, almost as if they were unable to perceive them at all, but the tension in the room was quickly reaching a climax as Wesley confronted the Warrior Queen.

"The particles are about to become unstable and the containment field will fail. You have to allow my people to shut it down or we're all going to die."

Donners turned to Bob Wesley at her side. "What's happening?"

"It worked," he said. "I thought about having more time to stop Omega from becoming unstable and it appears we got here with a minute to spare to try and stop this."

She touched a nearby wall and was relieved to find that it was tangible enough. "They can't see us but it looks like we may be able to influence events. What happens next?"

"We don't have much time," he said. "Talana, my science officer, will try and shut down the generator from that console but Ketteract will override her commands. Queen Ergia gets to Talana and kills her before she can do anything further."

"You stop Ketteract, I go after Ergia."

He nodded. "Let's go."

Wesley had been right. Time was running out. Zha'Thara was already at the console and Ketteract had somehow freed himself from his guards as well and working hard to keep the Andorian from successfully shutting down the Omega particles' final creation process.

Donners rushed towards the blue-skinned woman, still formulating a plan to save her life.

"The God-Queen will not allow it. Her will shall be done," Ergia cried as she stormed towards the science officer.

Donners bumped into the back of a Xenarth guard who immediately whipped around with his spear-like weapon. She managed to duck just in time to avoid being skewered by the razor sharp lance.

The warrior looked befuddled when he saw nothing and moved closer to investigate allowing Donners to slip by him.

"He's overriding my shutdown sequence," Zha'Thara said.

The infuriated Cleric Queen was almost on top of the Andorian who was too preoccupied to notice the Xenarth coming after her.

Maya considered for a moment ripping one of those spear-weapons out a warrior's grasp and use it to stop the supreme but somehow she figured that a magically moving weapon would perhaps be too difficult to explain later on.

Instead Donners jumped onto a console and then leaped over another to land on the floor immediately in front of the charging supreme.

The pain of impacting with the hard surface was nothing compared to having the Xenarth run into her at full speed. The effect however was exactly as desired as she immediately stumbled over the invisible obstacle, making it appear that she had slipped clumsily.

The Xenarth lost her balance and went flying only to land by Zha'Thara's feet. The startled Andorian jumped back but remained unharmed.

Bob Wesley in the meantime had reached Ketteract and had decided for an approach just about as unsubtle as Maya's had been. Standing right opposite the scientist as he was eagerly working the console to complete his previously ill-fated Omega stabilization process, Wesley roughly hit the other man's shoulders, shoving him away from the station.

Ketteract's eyes opened wide as he stumbled backwards after suddenly being hit by an invisible and inexplicable force.

The other Wesley, now no longer distracted by Zha'Thara's untimely death, was already halfway to Ketteract when he found him stumbling right towards him. Not a man to look a gift horse in the mouth, he cocked back a fist, turned the scientist around with his free hand and then hit him square in the jaw. Ketteract dropped like a sack of stones.

"That's what I call a tag team," Donners said quietly as she watched the two Wesley's working together to stop Kesseract from where she sat on the floor.

The commodore stepped over the downed scientist without giving him a second look and walked right up to the console. "Talana, shut it down," he yelled.

To her credit the science officer quickly recovered from the attempted attack on her person and was back to work at her station within an instant. "Initiating shutdown sequence now."

And then, for the first time since *Lexington's* landing party had arrived on this world, the Omega molecules attempting to form themselves to become the most powerful entity known to man, actually began to rescind and dim within the containment chamber while all eyes in the room watched with baited breath.

Just before it appeared they'd fizzle out completely, there was a bright white flash again and Maya knew that they had been unsuccessful. That somehow Omega had still found a way to unleash its power unto the galaxy in unfathomable ways.

She never found out if she'd gotten another chance to stop the unthinkable from happening.

Iota Crucis IV, 2267

Robert Wesley gasped for air like a man who had been submerged underneath water for far longer than anyone would ever volunteer.

His memories were in shambles.

He recalled a force gripping him, hitting him like lightning and pushing him across what felt like time and space.

He recalled the dreaded molecules escaping their containment field and putting an end to the universe as he knew it.

He remembered a bright flash, blinding him and robbing him of most of his senses all at once.

And yet here he stood, seemingly unharmed, hardly a scratch on him and the world around him still in one piece.

He couldn't explain why he felt that something was very much amiss for nothing appeared to be so.

On the contrary, as he looked up to find the containment field, he saw it dark and dead, without any sign of those powerful molecules which until very recently had threatened to destroy them all.

"They're gone. They're all gone. It can't be," mumbled a clearly dazed Bendes Ketteract from where he half-sat on the floor.

Wesley couldn't remember it in detail but he was certain he had deposited the scientist there. The pain in his right hand gave further proof that it had recently connected rather violently to his face.

Then another terrible thought crossed his mind and he whirled around trying to find his science officer. "Talana!"

She too appeared unharmed and seemed somewhat startled by the concern and emotion in his voice when she looked back at him. "Sir?"

"Are you ... are you alright?"

The puzzlement didn't immediately vanish from her soft features. Then she nodded curtly. "I'm fine, sir. The shutdown sequence has been successful. No signs of the molecules remains."

Doctor Vincent stepped up next to the clearly somewhat perplexed commodore, worry in his tone. "Are *you* alright?"

He considered the doctor for a moment before he spoke. "I'm fine. I think. A little dizzy to tell you the truth. And with the oddest feeling of *déjà vu*," he said and then reached out for the other man's upper arm before he could respond. New developments were already taking place among the Xenarth. "But this can wait until later."

The Warrior Queen had moved quickly to keep Ergia who had inexplicably stumbled during an attempt to attack Zha'Thara, pinned to the floor by wielding a spear weapon close to her throat. "Your reign is over, My Queen," she hissed just before she impaled Ergia with one forceful thrust and then watched with apparent satisfaction as her large black eyes flickered and her mandibles and antennae twitched desperately in the throes of death.

The room fell into silence as the Xenarth watched with disbelief a supreme being slain by a fellow Queen. An act unheard of in the history of the Aggregate.

"The supreme is dead," the Warrior Queen announced and then aimed a sharp look at Selphi who managed to stay stoic in the light of what had transpired here. The young Chelra on the other hand appeared frightened by what fate may befall her as a loyal servant to the now deceased supreme.

"But there is no need for more killing if you are willing to embrace me as your new leader," she said. "The Worker Queen has already joined me and if you are willing I shall forgive your previously misplaced loyalties and together we will form a new Aggregate to lead the Colony into prosperity right here on New Xenarth. Our new home."

Chelra immediately lowered her head. "You have my allegiance."

The Warrior Queen jerked her head in acknowledgment and then sought out Selphi.

"What will happen with Commodore Wesley and his people?" she said.

Quelphi considered this for a moment. "I cannot condone or forgive their inference in our affairs."

"If not for their actions, the Xenarth race would certainly have been annihilated," the Artisan Queen said.

"With out their interference this crisis would never have come to pass in the first instance."

Wesley took a small step forward, it was all he was allowed by the Xenarth soldiers who had once more surrounded him and his officers. "I understand that there is no way that I can prove this to you, but our intentions were never to interfere with your affairs but to ensure that this molecule would not come to destroy your people and threaten mine. I freely admit that we have made mistakes. I should never have agreed to assist Queen Ergia to try and stabilize the molecules to use them for her purposes. I should have insisted on their destruction from the very beginning but I cannot undo what has been done. But this doesn't mean we cannot try and start over.

You have decided to make this world your new home and I applaud this decision. Let me and my people help you establish yourselves in this part of the galaxy. Let us be your guides to your new neighborhood. We could discuss an alliance of mutual benefit and friendship and someday you may even wish to join our Federation as an equal partner."

It had been a good speech and Wesley had given it earnestly and with enough tact to convince many of the assembled Xenarth of his sincerity.

But it wasn't enough for the new supreme. "I reject your offer, Commodore. The Xenarth Colony has no interest in your Federation or this galactic neighborhood you speak of. Nor do we seek friendship with your people or others. I decree that from this day forward, New Xenarth will ban all technology deemed dangerous to our people. Further we will reject any contact with foreign aliens who seek to introduce such technology. We were a simple and happy people once and before we invited doom on ourselves by meddling in unfamiliar powers and inviting alien races among us. No longer. I will give you and your people exactly one opportunity to leave this world and never to return or you may choose to stay and be executed for your actions against the Colony."

It was not a difficult choice to make. "I'm disappointed about your decision but I will respect it with the hope that someday you may change your mind and seek out our friendship. And when that day comes we will gladly reciprocate it," said Wesley and indicate for his people to get ready to leave.

Kutznetsov picked up a clearly broken Ketteract who struggled to collect his equipment before being dragged along by the first officer.

The Xenarth soldiers returned the away team's weapons at their queen's command, clearly not interested in holding on to anything belonging to the now banned aliens.

Wesley hesitated for a moment before reaching the now blown-out doors of the lab and turned around much to the annoyance of the new supreme. "I have one final request to make."

Quelphi looked at him, her antennae flinching with impatience.

Wesley looked towards the now dark containment chamber and then down and to the adjacent wall where he found a similar but closed blast door. "Beyond that door your people stored a material called boronite. From my understanding it is what made the Omega particle possible in the first place. For your own safety and my peace of mind, I would ask that you destroy it."

Ketteract grasped his tricorder tightly. "No, we can still salvage—"

"That's about enough out of you," barked the Bear, shutting up the scientist.

The Warrior Queen gestured for her people to open the blast door and true to Wesley's word it revealed a dozen heavy cargo crates. She aimed an urgent look at the young Scholar Queen.

"He speaks the truth," she said in a tiny voice.

"If you allow me, we have the means to destroy it with little effort," Wesley said.

Quelphi didn't need long to consider the offer. "Make it quick. I wish you and these accursed things gone from my world."

Wesley nodded and indicated to Mtolo to follow him. "Phasers, maximum setting."

The two men unclipped their pistol-shaped weapons, dialed them up to full power and then opened fire, carefully aiming at each individual crate until they completely disintegrated. It took less than a minute until the chamber was cleared and the last pieces of boronite had been destroyed.

Wesley replaced his phaser and pulled out his communicator, flipping it open with a snap of his wrist. "Landing party to *Lexington*. We're done down here. Beam us up."

“And then I woke up and the Borg were gone.”

Terrence Glover and Amaya Donners were walking side-by-side as they headed down a corridor. Maya had only just beamed on-board and finished explaining how she had passed out just after they had activated the Omega weapon for reason neither Doctor Ssestar Rass nor anyone else had been able to explain to her yet.

“Everyone seems to have had a similar experience to the release of the weapon. Blurred vision, a sense of weightlessness and distortion in time and space but there were no reports of anyone losing consciousness or being struck by an energy discharge. Any idea what it was?”

“None,” she said. “A system diagnosis did not show any overloads or sudden energy discharges on the bridge when it happened. All we know for sure is that it took place coincidentally with the Omega release. It must be related somehow.”

“Now we may never know.”

She nodded. “But there was something else. I remember something happening to me while I was passed out. It’s almost like a quickly fading dream. I know I talked to somebody and I know it was important but every time I think I see his face or remember his voice, it slips away again. It’s very odd.”

The two captains reached their destination when they entered *Cuffe’s* cargo bay. Inside they found Lieutenant Seb N’Saba, Commander Rojas, Hugh as well as Daystrom who had beamed over from *Agamemnon* before Donners. They all stood around the resonance chamber which until recently had contained the last remaining Omega molecules the Xenarth had been able to synthesize. The chamber stood dark and empty now.

“Report,” Glover said.

The assembled men turned to face the two command officers.

"It's confirmed," said Daystrom, beating his colleagues to it. "No sign of the Omega molecule remains. Every last particle was consumed after we initiated the weapon."

"And yet we have no sensor record or visual evidence that the weapon was deployed," said a skeptical Terrence Glover. "How do you explain that?"

Clearly Daystrom couldn't.

"We know the Borg are gone," said Pedro Rojas. "And judging by my headache something happened to us after we deployed the weapon. I think that's enough physical evidence that we were successful."

The answer didn't seem to satisfy the two scientists in the room and especially not Daystrom who had once upon a time thought that the Omega molecule would provide answers to the universe's biggest questions.

Amaya noticed the disappointed look on the man's face. "I think it's for the best. We didn't blow up this system or destroy subspace throughout the quadrant. And we kept a potential super-weapon out of the Borg's hands. I'd call this a victory."

"No to mention we fulfilled the Omega Directive by destroying every last trace of it," said Glover.

"But we have no real sense of how any of this was accomplished. We've learned almost nothing about the particle itself other than to reaffirm how powerful it can be," said the broad-shouldered scientist.

"You know this was never about finding answers, Wayne," she said softly, apparently happy and willing to put aside the difficult conversations she'd had with the young man about this lately. "And I think we did learn a great deal here. We learned that your theory may have been right after all. Maybe Omega really is the force behind creation itself. After the things we've seen it's difficult to argue against it. And if this is true then we should be smart enough to know that we are nowhere near ready to try and mess with something powerful enough to do what it did today. Not to mention have the potential to alter or even create universes."

Daystrom ultimately nodded in agreement, apparently seeing the wisdom in Donners' words. She knew it would take some more time for him to fully appreciate what she had tried to tell him. After all it was difficult for any curious person, for any scientist studying the unknown, to accept that the answer to some questions were simply too complex to grasp and perhaps even too dangerous to know. At least for the time being.

"Kojo to Captain Glover."

"Go ahead, Commander," Terrence said after he had tapped his combadge.

"Just thought you'd like to know that we no longer detect any signs of those incoming Romulan ships. They appeared to have reversed course and moved outside sensor range."

"Good news, Commander," he said. "Keep your eyes open just in case. Glover out," he added and closed the channel.

Maya allowed herself a sigh of relief. "Another crisis averted. I guess once they realized that there was no more Omega molecule to claim they figured there was no value in trying to confront us over the Xenarth. Their interest in this system and the people of New Xenarth ended after Omega vanished."

Glover nodded. "I think we can safely assume they won't trouble us or the Xenarth again for a good while. It does leave us with one more loose end however," he said and both he and Donners turned to look at the former Borg drone in the room.

"You mustn't concern yourself with me," he said. "Captain Donners and I had an agreement and she has lived up to her side. I had a chance to observe Particle 010 one last time before it was released and it was one of the most perfect moments in my existence."

"So what will you do now?" she asked.

"I shall return to my vessel to help effect repairs. Once complete I intend to resume our journey towards the Delta quadrant and continue our fight to support those who are trying to oppose the Borg and liberate anyone I can from the collective."

"Tall order," said Glover.

"Before you head out again," said Maya. "I could use your help one last time."

Terrence shot her a quizzical look.

"Our primary mission here may be complete but we're not done yet," she said in response. "In fact the hardest part has only just begun."

Lexington, 2267

Wesley and his landing party stepped back onto the bridge just minutes after returning from the surface.

Ensign Aliz Bathory at the helm quickly left her chair upon seeing them return. "Mission Accomplished, sir?"

"We're still here, aren't we?" he said with a frown as he stepped up to his chair.

The curt respond caused the young ensign's shoulders to sag slightly as she sat back down.

"On the plus side," said Vincent with a large smirk plastered on his face, "we've saved the universe as we know it. Not a bad outcome, if you ask me."

"I agree," said the Andorian science officer on her way to her station. She spied through the sensor hood, adjusted the device once and then looked back up. "I'm reading no residual signs of the Omega particle anywhere on Iota Crucis IV. I think we can safely assume that the universe is going to be safe for a little while longer."

"And Ketteract has been secured in his quarters and placed under guard. After what he's done down there, I'm sure his career is going to be over," said Kutznetsov.

Wesley refused to have his bad mood altered by his senior officers and the frown seemingly etched on his features didn't lessen one bit.

Vincent noticed. "Come now, Captain. All in all this could've been a lot worse."

The commodore sought out Charles Vincent's eyes and held his look for a short moment. Then he nodded slowly. "I'm not denying that at all, Doctor. But I cannot convince myself to be satisfied with this outcome. We have meddled with the affairs of an alien race, we chose sides in a civil war and we have alienated an entire people. And who knows, perhaps Quelphi was right after all. Maybe if we had stayed out of their business altogether

we would never have gotten ourselves into a situation we almost weren't able to handle and causing unspeakable destruction."

The ship's surgeon stepped up next to Wesley's chair. "There are a lot of what ifs in that statement. As your doctor I recommend you stop worrying about the hypotheticals and start acknowledging your successes."

He gave the man a smirk. "Doctor's orders, eh?"

Vincent nodded. "That's right. You can beat yourself up all you want about making new enemies but in the end what matters is that they are still here and so are we. Put things into perspective."

Before Wesley could respond to this, Cilla Oudekirk piped up from communications. "Captain, we're being hailed. From the surface," she sounded as surprised as the faces of the senior officers' implied.

"Put it on, Lieutenant."

The screen shifted to show the Xenarth Artisan Queen. Or at least she had been before the new Aggregate leadership.

Wesley immediately leaned forward. "Selphi," he said. "Are you alright?"

She took a moment to respond as if perhaps considering her words carefully before speaking them out loud. Most likely she was being monitored. *"I am unharmed if that is what you are concerned about. I do not have much time. It was not easy for me to arrange talking to you like this."*

The commodore nodded. "Are you in danger? I'm happy to offer you political asylum on board *Lexington*. If you provide us with your coordinates —"

She raised one of her hands to stop him. *"I do not believe myself to be in danger, Commodore, but your gesture is greatly appreciated nevertheless. In fact, regardless of what has happened, I am very thankful to have met you and your people."*

"For what it's worth, we were happy to help. I can only pray we didn't make matters worse for you."

She shook her head slightly in what Wesley believed to be a gesture she had picked up from him and his people. *"On the contrary. I believe your influence has greatly benefited the Colony. While Ergia's death is a tragedy, her ideas were far to dangerous."*

"But is her replacement going to be any less so?"

"Quelphi is aggressive and xenophobic but she has the best interests of the Colony at heart. Her ideas are as radical as Ergia's were. Shunning technology and

alien visitors is going to wipe out centuries of progress but at least the Colony will be safe. She's willing to forgive those who sided against her. Neither I nor Chelra are in danger and we have been allowed to continue to lead our castes.

But it is my hope that one day we will be able to be part of that intergalactic community you spoke of. A small minority of Xenarth agree that we need more friends not enemies and while I remain here I will make every effort to convince the Aggregate of this as well.

Take care, Commodore Wesley of the starship Lexington. Perhaps one day we shall meet again as friends."

"As far as I'm concerned, we already are, Queen Quelphi," said Bob Wesley just before the channel closed and the Artisan Queen's face disappeared from the screen.

"With people like her around, I'd say not all hope is lost," said Vincent and promptly received an agreeing nod from Wesley.

"Captain," said Lawford from his station. "The swarm ships."

The view screen shifted again this time to show the familiar sight of the cluster of Xenarth bug-shaped vessels slowly moving towards *Lexington*. Nobody had to guess what their intentions were.

"I think we have just outlasted our welcome," grunted the Russian first officer.

Wesley nodded. "Agreed. Terrence, plot us a course out of the system. Aliz, take us out of orbit and then go to full impulse. Jump to maximum possible warp factor as soon as we are clear."

Both officers promptly acknowledged and worked their respective control boards.

For a moment there was silence on the bridge save for the usual operating noises coming from the various workstations as *Lexington* left the system behind. It wasn't difficult to notice Wesley's contemplative mien.

"What's on your mind?" said Vincent. "Is it about what happened on the surface? You seemed somewhat out of sorts there for a moment, I was concerned."

He nodded slowly before he looked up at the ship's surgeon. "Something happened down there. To me, I mean. I cannot describe it other than to say that for a brief moment in time it seemed everything was different somehow. Other than it should have been. It's a feeling deep down in my gut that something horrible happened and then it was all just gone. Like it had never happened in the first place."

Zha'Thara was intrigued and stepped down into the command well and next to his chair. "It almost sounds as if you are describing a temporal anomaly of sorts."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "There was somebody there with me. Somebody who didn't belong but as much as I'm trying to remember, I cannot recall her name or her face or who she was."

"A woman?" said Vincent.

Wesley considered him for a moment. "Yes, I believe so."

"What does all this mean?" said the first officer.

"It's very difficult to say," said ZhaThara. "Particularly since the commodore seems to have been the only person affected. But I would guess that this was somehow related to those particles which came pretty damn close to becoming unstable and wiping us all out."

"*Bozhe moi,*" said the Russian. "I suppose once Starfleet Command finds out about all the dangers around this cursed molecule I wouldn't be surprised if they'll declare a quarantine around all of Iota Crucis."

Wesley stood from his chair. "I think they will have to do much more than that, Commander," he said and then widened his focus to address the entire bridge crew. "This Omega particle nearly destroyed the entire quadrant. As much as it pains me to say so, but that kind of knowledge is dangerous and what happened here today should never be allowed to repeat itself. Starfleet will have to come up with clear dictates on how to deal with this in the future and I don't envy any starship crew or any starship commander who will have to deal with the Omega molecule again."

New Xenarth, 2372

The Aggregate Chambers had been a quite impressive building once, or at least so Amaya Donners believed.

It still maintained its spiral design and it still reached far above the surrounding towers, making it the clear focal point within the largest dome within the biggest city on New Xenarth.

But like many other structures on the planet, it had not fared the destruction of its moon particularly well. Most of the façade was now crumbling and the insides didn't look much better either. It didn't help that given recent events the Xenarth hadn't really had time to do much of a clean-up.

At least the Colony Hall, the room which the Aggregate used to hold council and consider petitions from the people had been given a good sweep before Donners had arrived along with Captain Glover, Counselor Vej and Commander Chen.

"I am not entirely convinced of the structural soundness of this building," the chief engineer said as he eyed the high and cracked ceiling suspiciously.

"That could be part of their plan," the counselor said with a little smirk "Put us into their most decrepit building and have it come down on top of us. Might solve some of their problems."

Chen turned to look at the Ullian, his feelers standing erect with concern.

"That was a joke," he quickly clarified.

Only then to watch with wide-open eyes as a whole chunk of a wall mural depicting the Xenarth exodus from their original home world, dropped to the floor with a loud thud.

"I hope."

But Donners seemed to be much more interested in the mural itself, the part that still remained on the wall, then the possible danger of being buried by it.

Glover joined her. "You're still sure about this? I can take this if you like."

She shot him a sidelong glance.

The other captain raised his hands in surrender. "Hey, I just remember the last time you tried to broker a peace and that didn't exactly end in smiles and sunshine."

"That was a different audience," she said and turned back to study the mural. "And I really thought that after leading the assault team to take care of the Omega molecule I'd get a little more credit."

"I'm not saying that you didn't do a good job with that, Maya. You did. But negotiating with the leadership cadre of an entire planet is not the same as leading a strike team and you know that."

She nodded. "Remind me the last time you did that?" Maya said without gracing him with another look.

He sighed. "Not exactly in my job description," he said. "But I've tangled with a few heads of state from time to time."

"Look at that," she said and pointing at a part of the mural, clearly eager to change the subject and move on.

"Are those ... Borg cubes?"

She nodded. "Ket told me about this. The Borg came after the Xenarth on their home world and were the main reason why they unwisely accelerated their plans to use the Omega molecule to power their star portals. The results were catastrophic," she said and considered another depiction which showed scores of Xenarth losing their lives when their technology failed to work the way they had hoped. "Millions of them died during their attempt to transport to their mythical realm of Xendaru and they landed here instead."

"On the bright side, all of them would've been wiped out by the Borg if they hadn't used the star portal at all."

Maya nodded. "True. But we know what the Borg were after. They had no interest in the Xenarth at all. They just wanted the Omega molecule at any cost."

The captain of the *Cuffe* found another mural of interest. This one too depicted the arrival of the Borg and the destruction of the Xenarth colonies and fleets but also something else.

Donners noticed his sudden interest. "What do you see?"

Terrence pointed out the many other starships, clearly not of Xenarth origin, fleeing the Borg. Some appeared massive in size, almost as large as the Borg cubes themselves. "If I'm not mistaken there are at least ten different types of ships depicted here, all fleeing the Borg, all because of what the Xenarth created and what apparently made the Borg stop at nothing to get for themselves."

"If you're right, the implications could be immense. Entire races made refugees by the Borg's single-minded aim, not of assimilation but to get their hands on Omega."

"Yes," he said. "And they would all have to head somewhere, wouldn't they?"

She understood his concern. A fleet of refugee ships on that scale could easily disrupt the stability of any sector. Perhaps even an entire quadrant. But Donners forced herself to focus on their more immediate problem. After all there was no indication that those who had been displaced by the Borg's fanatical pursuit of Omega had all decided to head towards the Federation. "What I take away from this is that the Xenarth have a justified fear of the Borg. Something we have clearly seen from their own actions."

Glover didn't miss the little twinkle in her eye. "What are you thinking?"

She finally turned away from the mural with a little smile playing on her lips. But before she could elaborate any further, the Xenarth Aggregate, what remained of it, finally entered the chamber after having left their visitors to wait for almost an hour.

There were only two of them left and Ket had briefed them in detail on the two individuals and their respective castes before departing for the planet.

The supreme, Scholar Queen Klestra, was dead, killed in the blast which had destroyed Apogee, one of their moons and the site of their primary Omega facility. The Warrior Queen, Samma, had been dispatched in combat by Lieutenant Mer'iab and Sh'Fane on Zenith, their second and now neutralized facility.

That only left the ultra-devout Cleric Queen, Nadelphi, and the efficient but introverted Liphra, leader of the numerous but mostly impuissant worker caste.

The two queens had brought two dozen armed guards with them, four of which remained close to their leaders while the rest quickly spread out to completely surround the room as well as the Starfleet delegation.

It had clearly been meant as a demonstration of strength but Maya couldn't help but interpret it as a gesture born out of fear.

Donners straightened her uniform and then shot her companions a quick look to let them know to assemble around her as she faced off the Aggregate.

"Starfleet," Queen Nadelphi said, her disdain obvious in her voice. "Know that you are not the first who have attempted to invade and conquer the great Xenarth Colony. The God-Queen stands with us, her righteous children, and with her blessing we shall prevail against you and all those who stand to oppose us."

Maya fought the urge to roll her eyes. "Honorable Queen Nadelphi, we have asked for this meeting to discuss recent events and what should happen next. You have agreed for us to come here and therefore I have been under the impression that we were your guests."

The Cleric Queen tensed noticeably. "You'd expect us to welcome you after the atrocities you have committed against our own? You are not just invaders, you are fools."

"I may give you fools, but we're not invaders," Glover said with a smirk.

His humor apparently didn't translate well and he merely received a blank look in return from Nadelphi.

"May we sit down?" Maya asked.

Liphra answered before the Cleric Queen had a chance. "You may," she said and then, when she received an angry look from her fellow queen, "They are correct that we have agreed to this meeting. Now that they are here, we may as well listen to them speak."

Nadelphi wasn't any more pleased but she made no efforts to stop them either.

Donners and her delegation took chairs around a crescent shaped table which faced five elevated chairs one for each member of the Aggregate. Liphra and Nadelphi awkwardly took their seats, momentarily considering if they should sit next to each other, apparently, before they settled on their designated positions which so happened to be at exact opposite ends.

“Speak then, human,” the Cleric Queen said, “and let it be over with.”

Maya took a deep breath before she began. “First, I wish it to be made known that I greatly regret the actions which we were forced to take against your people and the lives, on both sides, which were lost because of it. But I am convinced, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that if we had not done what we did, the consequences would have been far worse for all of us.”

“This is how you justify an attack on us?” Nadelphi fumed.

“I shall remind you that the opening shot was fired by your people, not mine,” said Donners, keeping her voice calm and steady. “And you made your intentions abundantly clear when you utilized your Xendaru particle as a weapon against us. And in doing so you not only destroyed your own moon, killing thousands, you severely damaged this entire region of space and put at risk the entire quadrant. Our actions, as despicable as they may appear to you, were carried out only to ensure the safety of this solar system and countless others beyond it.”

“And you simply expect us to believe these outrageous claims? That we have somehow damaged our own home?”

As if on cue, another large chunk of the mural fell off the wall, causing everyone in the room to turn suddenly at the loud noise of the pieces shattering on the floor.

Donners turned back to face them. “I believe the evidence is obvious,” she said and suppressed a little smile she felt coming on. Then she quickly recalled the seriousness of this meeting and instantly sobered up again. “And we will be able to provide you with a great amount of raw and untreated data we have been able to collect which you will be able to study so you may learn of the damage this Xendaru particle is capable of and what it already caused.”

“Let us assume that you speak the truth, Captain,” said Liphra. “What is it you have come here to propose?”

“A friendship.”

“Preposterous,” the cleric responded immediately. “Besides, we have already made an arrangement with the Romulans.”

“You may notice that your new, so-called friends are not here,” said Glover. “In fact once they realized that you no longer possess the Omega molecule, they turned around and left you to your own devices.”

Donners nodded. “That was their only interest in you.”

“And you are different?” asked Liphra.

“The Federation is an alliance between many different races. Humans, Vulcans, Andorians, Ullians,” she said and pointed at her counselor. “All working together for the common good. And we’re not limited to humanoids either as you can tell from Commander Chen who is a Ximid-Insectoid, not too different from the Xenarth.”

Nadelphi considered this for a moment, studying the Starfleet engineer who possessed undeniable similarities to her own race. “If you believe that you are simply able to parade your subject races to us in order to make us believe in your words, you are an even greater fool than I believed. We shall never subjugate ourselves to your Federation tyranny.”

“I see the Romulan propaganda machine is as efficient as ever,” Vej said under his breath.

“There is no subjugation involved,” Donners said. “In fact I am not even proposing that you become a Federation member. At least not yet. That process is a long and drawn-out affair which could take years until both sides believe themselves ready for such a significant commitment. But we could take the first step here today by agreeing to become friends.”

Nadelphi stood suddenly. “I say again, we have no interest in becoming your friend, Captain,” she said, all but ready to bolt out of the room.

Glover shot Maya a quick look to let her know that this wasn’t going very well. Of course at this point she didn’t have to be told.

That little glint was back in her eye and she leaned forward slightly, her voice taking on a much harder edge. “There is of course another issue you should consider before you make up your mind on this.”

“I doubt there is anything else you can say which would cause us to reconsider,” the Cleric Queen said.

“With the latest events you are no longer as isolated as you would like to think. The Romulan border is just a few hours away and they have already shown an interest in you once. If you cannot bring yourself to believe that our intentions are friendly, than you have no reason to believe that the Romulans would be any more cordial towards you.”

“You claimed the Romulans have no longer any interest in us,” said Liphra.

Glover took that one. “There is this saying. Never turn your back on a Romulan. Well, actually it’s never turn your back on a Breen but it works

on Romulans just as well. Trust me, they'll be back. Maybe not tomorrow but soon and they'll take from you whatever they can exploit."

"And then of course there are the Borg," Maya said and could tell by both their body language that they were immediately put on edge by her mention of the cyborg race which had already brought such suffering to their people.

"In fact one of their vessels still remains in your system. You tried to destroy them before but they survived and they are rebuilding their ship as we speak. Check your own sensors, they are heading for your planet right now."

Agamemnon, 2372

“Commander, Hugh’s vessel is entering orbit.”

Texx, sitting in the center seat, looked up after hearing Lieutenant Allenby’s report with a little smile playing on his blue lips. “Right on schedule,” he said. “On screen.”

Even after having been literally sliced apart, the oddly-shaped Borg vessel was still imposing enough to easily dwarf both Starfleet ships as it joined them around New Xenarth.

“Looks like they’ve been busy little Borg,” said DeSoto as he studied the ship on the screen. “Most of the damage appears to have been repaired.”

“Are the Xenarth seeing this?” the first officer said.

Allenby nodded. “Not a chance they’re not. Even with the damage they have sustained recently, we know they have no trouble scanning their own orbit. And right now most of their focus is on this corner.”

DeSoto grinned. “Yeah, they were worried about two Starfleet ships? I’d say they just got a whole lot more scared.”

Texx stood up smoothly. “Belay that talk, Ensign. Otherwise one might get the impression we’re here to intimidate the Xenarth which we most assuredly are not. Hugh simply needs to complete a few repairs while in orbit before they can be on their way.”

The young helmsman couldn’t keep that smirk off his face. “Of course. And that’s all they’re doing.”

The Bolian nodded with satisfaction and then headed for the turbolift. “Good time as any to catch up on paperwork. Bobby, why don’t you take the bridge for a while?”

“Sure ... what?” the helmsman swiveled his chair around only to see Texx’s back as he walked towards the exit. Instead he caught the equally surprised look on Allenby’s face who had also whirled around at the

unexpected hand-off. Except that her features were quickly turning into an angry frown.

She shot the befuddled pilot a venomous look and then jumped to her feet to follow the first officer before he could get off the bridge. "Sir? Commander?" she called after him.

He turned back around and sighed dramatically as if having expected this.

"Sir, surely you realize that I'm the next most senior officer on the bridge. I should have command in your absence."

"Well, yes, technically –"

"Technically?" she said, clearly fighting the urge to raise her voice too high. "Sir, with all due respect, it's regulation. I mean ... DeSoto isn't even a senior officer. He's never even had command duty before. I'm not even sure if he's certified."

"You remember what we talked about, Lieutenant. We all have to work together," he said and intertwined his digits for demonstrative effect. "Consider it a team building exercise."

"Sir, I must strongly protest. This is not –"

"Protest noted and logged. Now follow my orders," he said and then practically darted off the bridge to avoid having to explain himself any further to the clearly exasperated woman who was left standing with her mouth hanging wide open in shock.

"Look, it's not that bad Tess, I promise I'll follow all the regs in the book," said DeSoto who had clearly gotten over the shock of being given command much quicker, not to mention better, than Allenby.

She turned around slowly only to find him now standing by his station with a growing grin on his boyish face. It clearly only infuriated her further. Before he could say anything else, she raised a finger in his direction. "Not one more word out of you, Ensign," she said as she headed back to ops, trying to keep her chin up but unable to keep her shoulders from slouching in defeat.

DeSoto watched her quietly as she took her seat again. "Thing is with being in command and all, I kind of have to give orders."

She sighed heavily. "We're in orbit with no apparent threats for light-years around. There are no orders you'll have to give so just sit back down, keep your mouth shut and wait for the commander to come back," she said without gracing him with even the shortest glance.

"I'll sit down," he said. "But I think I'll take the captain's chair," he added and then found a crewman working on the aft station. "Schmidt, can you take over the helm for me?"

The young, blonde-haired petty officer nodded and quickly stepped up to take the chair DeSoto had just vacated.

That left him free to step up to the captain's seat and slowly, almost reverently, lowering his backside into it. "This sure is comfortable. And the view is terrific," he said, clearly hoping that Allenby would take the bait and turn around again with one of her intense glares she liked to reserve for him. She didn't give him the satisfaction.

So he went to drum his fingers on the armrests and then studied the small imbedded monitors, using the panels to bring up status displays the way he had observed the captain do on occasions. "Everything seems to be fine here," he said, trying to sound important.

"I'm getting some odd readings from the Borg ship," said Allenby, fully focused on her station now.

"Okay."

"No, not okay," she responded angrily. "Something very odd is happening over there."

"Stop messing with me."

She turned around to face the man in the center seat, her face a stern mask of professionalism. "I don't mess around with those things, Ensign."

He gulped. "Alright, what's happening then?"

She turned back to her station. "I'm not sure but it almost looks as if—"

"Energy discharge from the Borg vessel," the large-eyed Kamorian tactical officer shouted from his board, clearly having been caught completely off-guard.

All eyes darted to the view-screen just in time for them to witness a bright lance of emerald-green light being hurled at the *Cuffe*.

DeSoto jumped onto his feet. "What's going on?"

"The *Cuffe* was just hit by an unknown weapon," said Allenby. "All her systems are powering down."

"The Borg vessel is turning," the tactical officer said, his voice sounding ominous.

On the screen Hugh's ship was quickly facing *Agamemnon* and their gun points were glowing brightly even before it had completed the maneuver.

"They getting ready to fire on us," Allenby cried.

"Shields. Raise shields. Do it, do it now," DeSoto shouted, his voice cracking up noticeably.

But the energy discharges had already been released and instantly found the stationary and unprepared *Agamemnon*, striking her head on. The ship heaved and buckled under the impact.

The alert siren began howling and the lights on the bridge turned dark red.

"Where are the shields? Do we have shields?" DeSoto asked desperately.

But even before he had finished his question, most of the consoles around him began to flicker and fluctuate. The main lighting cut off.

"We're experiencing system-wide computer failures. Everything is shutting down. Weapons, shields, life support, everything," said Allenby as she angrily banged against her console as if trying to pound it back into submission.

"Look," Schmidt said from the helm. "It's turning on the planet."

The Kamorian at tactical confirmed. "It's targeting the capital city."

"The captain's down there," said DeSoto, clearly unable to believe what was happening. "We have to do something."

Allenby turned from her station. "You're in command, you give the orders."

DeSoto stared at her in disbelief. "What can we do? I don't know what we can do with all systems failing. You take command, damn it, I'm just an ensign."

She nodded. "Alright but first say you're sorry."

"What?"

"Say you're sorry for turning my breakfast into *gagh*."

"I'm sorry, alright. I'm really, really sorry, now take command already."

On the screen the Borg vessel was bringing its weapons online again, this time those gun ports were pointing straight at the surface of the planet.

Tess Allenby stood from her station. "Say you're sorry for messing with my sonic shower."

"Are you insane? They're about to kill the captain."

But Allenby just crossed her arms under her chest, tapping her foot. "I'm still waiting."

DeSoto turned to look at the other crewmembers on the bridge to see if anyone else had realized that Allenby had lost her mind. But nobody seemed to have noticed the obvious. He looked back at the screen where the Borg vessel still hovered and then at Allenby standing in the middle of the bridge with seemingly no care in the world that their captain was about to be incinerated.

Texx arrived on the bridge. "Ensign, is there something you want to say?"

Then the other shoe finally dropped. "I'm ... sorry?" he offered to Allenby. "I'm sorry for everything I've done to you since you've been on board. It was childish, out of line and unbecoming of a Starfleet officer."

"Tess?" the first officer said.

She shrugged. "Good enough."

The lights and all the consoles came back to life instantly. The screen shifted to show what had always been the case. Hugh's vessel peacefully parked in geosynchronous orbit alongside *Cuffe* and *Agamemnon*.

Schmidt and the tactical officers couldn't hold back chuckles.

DeSoto had never seen Allenby with a smile that big before. In fact he couldn't remember ever having seen the icy woman smile at all. "That was cruel."

"But so worth it."

He looked at Texx who made no effort to keep his own smile in check. "You were in on it? You were all in on this?"

He nodded.

"Okay then, I'll admit it, I have been totally and completely outpranked and I feel absolutely devastated," he said and let himself fall back into his now emptied chair at the CONN. "You got me. You got me real good."

New Xenarth, 2372

"You ... you suggest these machine people, the Borg, would threaten us with extinction once more?" said the clearly agitated Worker Queen once an assistant had confirmed to both her and her fellow Aggregate member that the Borg vessel had in fact entered orbit moments ago.

Terrence Glover leaned in closer to Donners. "You know that there is a word for what you're doing here," he said in a whisper low enough that it would not be overheard by the others. "It's called gunboat diplomacy."

"I'd call it a good bluff."

"This is insanity," said the Cleric Queen who was now pacing in front of the Aggregate chairs nervously before she looked back to the Starfleet delegation. "You said it yourself, we no longer have the ability to create the Xendaru particle, you've seen to that. What possible reason could these Borg have to invade us now?"

"These Borg?" Maya said. "Probably none. But these are not the ones you should be worried about. There are billions of other Borg out there and as you have already learned, they will stop at nothing to get their hands on the Omega particle. And yes, you're right, you no longer have the ability to create it. For now. But a hundred years ago, after you turned down our offer of friendship, you were in a much similar situation. Back then it also appeared that you were no longer in a position to create that which has led to your near undoing three times now.

Think about what's best for your people. Are you really willing to risk making the same mistakes you've made before and invite your doom a fourth time? You may be determined to swear of Omega now, but so were your predecessors a century ago. All it takes is another unexpected change in your leadership or perhaps a rogue element within your society to start all this over again.

There is an old saying among my people. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. I'm imploring you to learn from your past and choose a different destiny for yours."

For a moment nobody spoke as Donners' words were slowly being digested by the two remaining rulers of New Xenarth. Maya could tell that she was making inroads and certainly Liphra appeared to give her arguments due consideration. She couldn't quite tell if this was because of her oratory and argumentative skills or because of Hugh's Borg vessel looming in near orbit.

"What would you propose?" the Worker Queen said and immediately received an angry look from her fellow queen in response. She chose to ignore it.

"A Federation protectorate status lasting for at least the next five of your years," said Amaya. "The Federation would pledge to defend you against any foreign enemies during that period and in turn be allowed to monitor and study your world, from orbit or via a medium-range observation station if you prefer, to learn more about you but also to ensure that no new attempts are made to create the Omega molecule. After those five years we'll make a mutual decision on the shape the relationship between your people and the Federation should take."

"And you would agree not to directly interfere with our affairs?"

Maya offered a smile. "As we learn more about you, Queen Liphra, it is my hope that you will also learn more about us. And contrary to what you may have seen us do recently, one of our most valued directives is not to interfere with the internal affairs of other races."

At that the Cleric Queen offered an angry hiss. "You truly expect us to believe this after you all but went to war with us and killed nearly three hundred of our soldiers?"

Maya cringed inwardly at hearing that figure, the first time since the conclusion of the assault mission that she had been given an indication of the destruction she and her team had wrought on the Xenarth. She was well aware of the number of people she had lost but she had not learned of the casualties on the other side. She managed to keep her outward appearance focused and confident but not without effort.

Surprisingly Liphra responded before Donners had the chance. "Our commanders did advise that many more of our soldiers survived thanks to the Federation troops employing non-lethal force."

The Cleric Queen dismissed this with a quick wave of her lower arm. "What is of consequence is that we were heinously attacked and that Xenarth blood was spilled. It does not matter if we lost three, three hundred or three thousand."

Donners aimed her steely eyes on Nadelphi. "As I said before, I greatly regret the loss of life on both sides, but make no mistake, if you threaten not just your own world but the entire galaxy the way you have done with the Omega molecule, there are no lengths we are not prepared to go to in order to stop you. But that is all. We would happily offer you advice or assist you at your request but we will make no effort to otherwise interfere with your people."

The Cleric Queen was not appeased. "Your words sound hollow to the God-Mother and to me as well," she said and then turned to leave the chamber.

But she left alone. Liphra remained in her seat and even the guards stayed in place, almost as if they had been swayed by the argument of these foreigners.

As the Worker Queen made not comment about her colleague's departure, Maya continued as if nothing had changed. "There is only one matter we'd have to clarify before we can agree to proceed with what I have proposed."

"What would that be?"

Maya tapped her combadge. "Donners to *Agamemnon*. Beam her down, please."

Within a moment a column of bright blue, shimmering lights gave way to the form of Queen Ket, coalescing between the Starfleet delegation and the one remaining member of the Aggregate in attendance.

The guards tensed at seeing the former Artisan Queen appear.

The Worker Queen stood but then raised her two upper arms to indicate her guards to remain where they stood. Then she addressed the newcomer. "Ket."

"Liphra."

Donners stood as well. "As part of the deal that comes with your Federation protectorate status, I formally request that all charges against Queen Ket are dropped in light of the new evidence presented here today that clearly demonstrates that she has acted only in a manner to protect the Xenarth people from the dangers of the Omega molecule which could have

lead to the entire destruction of this solar system, had it not been destroyed."

Liphra nodded. "The circumstances appear to warrant such action."

Ket lowered her head gratefully.

"And if I'm not mistaken, after the death of Queen Klestra, the role of supreme is due to fall onto the Artisan Queen," said Maya.

Liphra looked at the Starfleet captain with surprise evident even through those big, round compound eyes. Either surprise at her intricate knowledge of Aggregate affairs or perhaps because she herself had not considered this until that very moment.

"Is this not correct?" said Maya, putting on her most innocent face.

"No," said Liphra, "you are not mistaken. The Artisan Queen must be the next supreme. The law demands this."

"What about Nadelphi?" Glover said. "Will she accept this as well?"

"The Cleric Queen believes in the law as I do. She will not choose to defy it," said Liphra and then looked back at Ket. "Supreme," she said. "I stand ready to serve you and the Colony. What are your orders?"

Ket needed a moment to come to grips with the new role which had been bestowed upon her so suddenly, apparently never having expected that an Artisan Queen would hold such power in her lifetime. "Perhaps our first course of action should be to speak to the Cleric Queen and make her understand the new path the Colony has embarked upon. It won't be an easy task but I am sure you are up to it."

Liphra jerked her head to the side in acknowledgment. "I will see to it straight away," she said and then turned to leave the room and find the infuriated Nadelphi to clue her in on the developments which had transpired in her absence.

"I have to say," said Vej. "That went much easier than I expected."

"You call this easy?" Chen said.

"Try negotiating anything with a Tellarite delegation and we'll talk again," the counselor said with a little smirk.

Ket approached the Starfleet team. "Captain Donners, I would like to once again offer my gratitude to you and all your people for what you have done for mine as well as for me personally. I may not be proud of all my actions but you have shown me that ultimately they were necessary for the good of the Xenarth and the galaxy as a whole."

"It is us who should be thankful, Ket. Without your help things could have been much worse than what they turned out to be."

"Do you think you'll be alright?" said Glover. "Will the Aggregate and the rest of your people follow you and accept you as their supreme?"

"I do not believe it to be easy. We will have to tread very carefully. Over a hundred cycles ago the Colony was nearly torn apart by civil war brought on by very similar circumstances. It will take all our efforts to prevent a similar disaster to befall us now and to be honest I am not certain if I am the right person to lead my people through this."

Donners offered an encouraging smile. "In my experience, those most convinced of their ability to lead are usually the least qualified."

"There are notable exceptions of course," Glover said.

"In any case, there is much work for me to do in order to prepare the Colony to accept the friendship you and the Federation have offered. And there are many changes I would like to propose to make Xenarth a fairer and more equal society."

Maya nodded. "If you ask me, I couldn't think of a better person for the job."

Ket tried a little nod to show her appreciation. The foreign gesture was jerky but it communicated her sentiment sufficiently.

"And you will remember my other request," said the captain of the *Agamemnon*.

"Of course," she said. "It shall be my first formal act in my role as supreme."

"I truly appreciate that," said Maya. "I guess in that case, there isn't much more to do than to wish you the best of luck. And regardless of how things will go with your people and the Federation, I want you to know that you will have a friend in us."

"And you in me, Captain."

"Sir, with your permission, I'd like to stay a few more moments to speak to Supreme Ket," said Chen.

Vej immediately threw the chief engineer a concerned look, fully aware of the promise he had made to the Xenarth earlier.

Donners clearly suspected something as well but did her best not to let it show too much. Instead she looked back at the new leader to the Aggregate. "If it's alright with your host."

"It is."

"Very well," said Donners and then tapped her combadge. "Agamemnon, two people to beam back on board. Please beam Captain Glover back to *Cuffe*."

They offered their last goodbyes and then the Starfleet delegation save for Chen dematerialized.

Ket dismissed the guards before she turned back to the Xindi engineer. "When we first met I certainly didn't expect things to develop in such a manner."

"None of us did."

"I was all but ready to leave my people behind and make peace with the fact that I might never see my home again. And now I have become the leader of my people," she said as she slowly moved closer to the Starfleet officer.

His mandibles curved slightly in an approximation of a smile. "I suppose that would be a little bit of an adjustment for anyone."

She tilted her head slightly as if she didn't quite understand.

"Humans tend to call this irony," he explained. "It is difficult to fully understand but they use it quite frequently. It involves saying one thing and meaning the exact opposite."

"Humans are strange creatures."

"That they are," he said and then after a moment: "I suppose our plans to travel the galaxy together, to guide you across the many worlds of the Federation has been delayed due to recent events."

"So it would seem."

"But this mustn't mean we have to go our separate ways again," he said. "I could remain here. Perhaps represent the Federation as you convince your people to embrace your new protectorate status."

"I sincerely wish this were possible," she said and her feelers noticeably drooped, mirroring her saddened state. "But I cannot imagine my people being ready to accept a foreigner, a Federation representative no less, to live among us so soon after what has happened. The Colony has always been aggressively xenophobic and it will take a great amount of work and effort to make them change their ways."

Chen looked obviously disappointed by this and it appeared Ket wasn't quite able to bear to see him that way. She turned away as she spoke again. "I have so many ideas for my people, Chen," she said as she slowly walked along what remained of the mural covering the walls. "A society which no longer fears or wishes to dominate the galaxy that surrounds us. A society where male and female colonists have the same rights and the same chances. A society where any member can aspire to hold any position and occupation regardless of which caste they were born

into. A society which will chose its leaders instead of them being appointed by old-fashioned laws," she said with a voice which didn't mask her euphoria and then turned back to the Xindi. "And one day, sooner than later, I hope, we will be just like those Federation worlds you spoke of. Still true to our own culture and traditions but also progressive and forward-thinking and perhaps even ready to become a member of your great Federation."

Chen took a step towards her. "Noble ideals all."

"And we can make them reality."

"But I would be a distraction. I understand."

She approached him again until they were mere inches apart from each other. "I wish to remake this world into a place that will welcome any visitors with open arms. Including you."

"Then I shall await that moment with great anticipation."

Both their heads tilted forward and towards each other until their antennae touched and intertwined and they shared with each other something that went far beyond what words could ever convey.

They enjoyed the experience to the fullest as they both understood that it would be a long time until they would be able to ever do so again.

Lexington, 2267

They had caged him like an animal but Bendes Ketteract didn't care. He wasn't surprised that these ignorant and terrified fools had treated him in this manner. He had come to expect it. It no longer mattered. Not now that he had been given a glimpse of perfection.

For that was exactly what the Omega molecule was. Pure perfection.

And he was the only person in the galaxy who knew how to stabilize it.

Wesley thought that he had destroyed the boronite on the surface and the material was rare enough that it would take decades to source enough of it to attempt to synthesize another Omega molecule. What Wesley didn't realize nor did the foolish new Queen of the Xenarth, that Chelra was a lot more cunning and resourceful than her fellow Xenarth gave her credit for.

Of course it had been mostly his idea to move some of the Xenarth boronite reserve to a secondary site but in the wake of possible civil war she had agreed and while they had watched Wesley incinerate the main stockpile, Chelra and Ketteract had been assured in the knowledge that a second stash remained in a secure and unknown location.

No matter how cunning however, he doubted very much that the young Scholar Queen would be able to attempt synthesizing any more of the molecule even with the boronite available. The new administration would immediately seize and destroy any remaining boronite if they were made aware of its existence and the resources required to create just one Omega molecule were far too extensive to be able to do it in secrecy.

No, the Xenarth would not be able to make another attempt in quite some time.

That was perfectly alright with Ketteract. He was happy to take the credit himself.

He got out his bulky tricorder and quickly dismantled the bottom to find a large hollow compartment within. Except for it wasn't hollow anymore.

Ketteract used his fingers to pry into the device and very carefully retrieve a long, smooth brick of pure boronite-235 in its densest form. It wasn't much but it was more than enough to get started on synthesizing at least a handful of Omega molecules.

As for resources he was not concerned.

It didn't even matter what Wesley and his crew would put in their reports. Ketteract was well connected within the Federation scientific community and he was convinced that his current status as persona non grata wouldn't last very long.

It wouldn't be difficult to convince people to follow him and have the chance to artificially produce the power of gods.

He knew of a scientific research station out in the Lantaru sector far off any trading or patrol routes and away from the prying eyes of self-righteous Starfleet captains like Wesley and their ilk.

It would be the perfect place for the re-birth of the Omega molecule.

Agamemnon, 2372

"I just can't get over the thing you pulled on me up there. That was totally cruel but so incredibly beautiful at the same time. One prankster to another, my hat's off to you," said Bobby DeSoto, leaning casually against the turbolift wall while Allenby stood mere inches in front of him but refused to turn and face him.

"I am not a prankster," she said but was not able to keep that little smirk off her face.

"You could have fooled me," he said. "I mean, man, that was the prank of the century. People will be talking about this for years."

"Let's hope not."

"It really made me see you in a completely new light. The way you got everyone on the bridge, including Commander Texx to play along. Wow, just wow."

"I don't need you to see me in a new light."

DeSoto couldn't quite help his eyes dropping a little towards her backside. Allenby had a terrific body shape which looked great in her uniform jumpsuit. She was certainly smart and, for the first time, he realized that she had a wicked sense of humor as well. One she had gone to great lengths to hide from anyone.

The turbolift arrived at its destination and the doors opened. "Do me a favor, Bobby."

"What's that?" he said even while his thoughts were drifting.

She turned her head to look over her shoulder. "Stop staring at my ass," she said with a grin and then walked out of the turbolift.

DeSoto looked after her with a dumbfounded expression on his face. It took him a moment to dispel it and then quickly ran after her. "You have to admit it's a pretty fine looking posterior."

She didn't slow down as he joined her by her side. Instead she offered him a sidelong glare, making it clear that discussing her anatomy had stopped amusing her a while back.

He gently reached for her arm to stop her. "Okay, listen Tess, I know I've been a little out of line with you."

She raised an eyebrow. "A little?"

"A lot," he said. "And I know you were mad as hell and you had every right to be. Your whole attitude was just so ... uppity all the time, like you were somehow better than everyone else."

"Better?" she said incredulous. "I'm not thinking I'm better than anyone. But I'm a full lieutenant, Bobby. Maybe I haven't been for long but still. I'm a senior officer now and I need to act like one. And you pulling these antics is making my life a living hell."

"Consider us even now."

"You'll respect me and my rank?"

He shot off a tight salute. "Yes, ma'am."

Tess rolled her eyes.

"Will you admit that you like me?"

Her eyes remained hard as stone.

"A little bit?" he said, holding his fingers apart by a mere inch.

"Fine, a little bit," she said with a sigh.

"See, that wasn't so hard," he said and moved closer to her.

Before Tess knew what was happening, his lips met hers. Her eyes opened wide at first but then they closed and she allowed his tongue to slip into her mouth.

It lasted all but a couple of seconds until a voice in the back of her mind must have called her back to reality. She harshly pushed him away, forcing their lips to separate again. Her face was bright red. "Damn it, Bobby, what the hell?"

He offered an innocent look in response. "I thought we had a moment there."

"You thought wrong," she shot back furiously. "What did I just say about respecting my rank? God, you're incorrigible," she added, turned on her heels and stormed off.

"I've been called worse," he said after her with a huge grin plastered on his face and secure in the knowledge that whatever protestations she had offered after the kiss, for just the briefest moment she'd enjoyed it as much as he had.

* * *

Besides Doctor Rass and a number of members of her staff, Maya was surprised to also find Beatiar Sh'Fane in the large cargo transporter room and by all accounts looking just as anxious as she felt.

Donners felt a large sigh of relief coming over her lips when Mer'iab and his team began to materialize on the transporter padd.

Queen Ket had remained true to her word when she had promised her that she would do whatever was in her power to ensure to locate and try to return the Starfleet team left behind on Zenith. It now appeared her people had indeed accepted the Artisan Queen as their new supreme and promptly followed her orders when she had commanded the release of the prisoners.

And Maya was thankful there were prisoners. Her worst fear had been that Mer'iab and his team had been killed, either by fighting to the last man or executed after the battle had concluded.

Sh'Fane had been the first at the tall avian's side once he had materialized, beating Rass and her medical team to it. Maya tried hard not think of the term ruffled feathers as the Andorian helped Mer'iab off the platform. Like most of his team, his uniform was dirty, torn and bloodied and while many of the humanoids had scratches and bruises covering their skin, his amber plumage appeared to be in disarray.

He waved off the nurses trying to treat him but interestingly he never once turned down help from the Marine commander who was more than willing to give it. In fact an unspoken agreement seemed to pass between the two warriors. Maya was curious to find out what exactly had transpired on the surface that had made them come together like this. Their reports, she was sure, would make for interesting reading.

"Lieutenant," she said as he stepped up before her.

He pushed the Andorian away gently; intend to stand on his own two legs while facing the captain.

"Sir," he said. "I regret to inform you that we lost twelve good men on the surface."

Donners noticed the coffin-like boxes that had been beamed up along with what remained of the team. She focused on Mer'iab again. "But you

brought them back. You brought them all back. And most of them you brought back alive. That is more than I could've hoped for."

His large bright, blue eyes made contact with hers. "I followed your orders, sir. You told me to survive and I did my best to ensure that the men would."

She nodded curtly, feeling tears of relief in her own eyes but fighting hard to keep them contained.

"Shortly after you left and we were surrounded on all sides, I gave the order to surrender, knowing that any additional aggression on our part would cause me to fail your instructions. The Xenarth accepted and we were taken prisoner. And despite what we have seen of them, despite their ferociousness when in battle, we found that for the majority they are decent people. We were not harmed or mistreated in captivity. They provided us with food and water and basic medical care."

"That speaks well of our hopes of a lasting friendship between our people," she said with renewed hope that perhaps Ket's ambitious plans were not quite as challenging as she had feared. "Your last order for today, Lieutenant, is to get yourself and your team to sickbay and get whatever care you need. I don't expect to see you back on duty for at least a week."

He nodded sharply, not seeing any reason to object to that.

Sh'Fane stepped back in and he allowed her to help him out of the cargo bay only after all his men were back on board and being seen to by the medical personnel.

Donners remained in the cargo bay as well, watching as members of her security personnel, as well as Marines and *Cuffe* crewmembers were being beamed onboard in groups. She was glad for every familiar face she recognized, including Elborough, the young science officer who had been charged with shutting down one of the Omega generators. The diminutive woman eyes were bright red and she remained close to one of the coffins, containing the body of one of the men who had not been lucky enough to escape with his life.

The young ensign stayed even after the room had cleared and Donners stepped up close to her, gently touching her shoulder.

"Captain," she said, clearly surprised to still finding her here. She immediately tensed up.

"As you were, Ensign."

She nodded and relaxed.

Donners touched the smooth, unmarked coffin.

"Lieutenant Chi Ling Yuen," said Elborough at the unspoken question.

Hearing his name stung her. She had known the young security officer. Not well, of course but she remembered meeting him a few days earlier. Remembered that he had a proud mother and father as well as a younger sister back home in Shanghai. He was one of thirty-eight crewmembers they had lost in the assault. Two remained in critical condition in sickbay. She knew it wasn't a number she would soon forget. In fact, she was determined not to forget Yuen's name or any of those of who had given their lives following her orders.

The two women stood alone among the dead in silence for a while longer. Then Maya once again squeezed the ensign's shoulder gently before she headed for the exit.

"Captain?"

She stopped and turned around to face Elborough.

"May I ask a question?"

She nodded.

The science officer hesitated for a moment. "Was it all worth it?"

Donners considered this for a moment even while her eyes wandered across the room to take in the twelve coffins. Then she faced the ensign again. "I suppose having that kind of certainty, to know without a shadow of a doubt that we did all we could, that there was no other way, that these brave souls did not give their life in vain, it would make us all feel much better, wouldn't it?"

Elborough offered only empty eyes in response.

Maya managed a grim smile. "Yes, A.J., it was worth it. Because knowing that is the only way any of this makes any sense," she said and then left the cargo bay.

* * *

"Captain, do you have a moment?"

Amaya stopped short of entering the turbolift and turned to find Wayne Daystrom heading his way. Not for the first time, the tall, broad-shouldered science officer reminded her a little bit of a younger version of

Terrence Glover. Even more so if he didn't let those broad shoulders slump the way he did.

Of course she hadn't yet forgotten the manner in which the young man had stood up to her on Zenith. Back then he had not been shy of using his large frame to his full advantage. She wasn't exactly proud to admit that at one point she'd actually considered cutting the man down with a phaser in order to ensure his total compliance.

None of those thoughts were apparent however when she regarded him with a friendly smile. "Of course, Wayne, what's on your mind?"

He looked pained and even though it appeared to her that he had thought carefully about exactly what he had wanted to tell her, the words came over his lips only hesitantly now and only after rubbing his neck awkwardly. "I ... I wanted to apologize for my recent behavior, Captain. I fully understand if you have lost any confidence you may have had in me and if you'd prefer me to resign my —"

"Wayne, let me stop you right there," she said and held up a hand before pulling him aside and away from the turbolift. "I'm not going to lose my science officer on my first mission."

"But I let you down, Captain. I didn't follow your orders the way I should have."

"You followed my orders, it just took you a moment to come around and see things my way."

He looked at her skeptically.

"Listen, I'm not going to stand here and pretend that things went the way they should have down there. Certainly not between the two of us, but I can also not ignore the fact that we were all under a great deal of pressure and put into a situation some of us were less ready for than others."

"Even more reason to make my hesitations unforgivable."

She shook her head. "I don't believe in that," she said. "Should you have followed my orders without question? Absolutely. But you also stood up for what you believed in. You tried to protect what you thought was more than a lifeless molecule but perhaps life itself."

"But at what cost?"

"What matters to me is that you did the right thing in the end, Wayne. And I know what went through your head. You were conflicted — maybe you still are — about your place in the universe. You have this massive legacy you feel you have to live up to and you saw Omega as your way to do it."

That didn't help matters at all and Daystrom's face fell as his gaze dropped onto the space between their boots. "You make it sound as if I cared more about my legacy than the good of the galaxy."

She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "No, I don't believe that. Not anymore. I think you showed us down there exactly what you're made of, and I think it's the right kind of stuff."

When he looked up again a little gleam had appeared in his eyes. "I will never give you reason to doubt me again, Captain. I promise you that. Not ever."

She nodded.

Daystrom turned but before he had taken more than one step, she called after him again. He faced her once more and she swiftly closed the distance between them. "I'm sure you won't, but I also need you to know that if you ever disobey one of my orders again, there will be consequences."

The science officer held her intense look for a moment before he responded with a crisp nod and then walked away.

Maya allowed herself to exhale a little bit as she watched him depart. She had little doubt about his sincerity and his value to her and her crew. Undoubtedly Daystrom was young and inexperienced but he had also demonstrated his brilliance, his commitment and his passion. Regardless of what had happened, she knew he was a good fit on *Agamemnon*.

Before she turned back to head towards the turbolift she spotted two more crewmembers who had given her reason to worry recently.

Tess Allenby and Bobby DeSoto had stopped at a junction down the corridor from her and were, for a change, seemingly discussing something amicably. She couldn't tell what it was they were saying but seeing that Allenby wasn't as flustered or angry as was usually the case when confronted with the young helmsman, she was fairly certain it was a civil conversation.

She arched an eyebrow in surprise when DeSoto leaned in and kissed Allenby who seemed to respond to the gesture in kind.

Not wanting to pry into her people's off-duty activities, she promptly turned around to head for the turbolift.

She was unable to keep a playful smile off her face as she considered how well her crew appeared to have coped with recent events and with each other.

* * *

"I'll have to take a rain check on that date I'd promised, I'm afraid," said Glover who was speaking to her through her desktop computer. "We've got a new mission that'll take us close to Klingon space and I've been told I should've been on my way yesterday."

"I suppose saving the universe can really play havoc with your schedule," she said with a twinkle in her eye.

"Just damned inconvenient, that's what it is."

She nodded. "So, another missed date then? That's the story of us, isn't it?"

"It would seem that way."

Maya considered the dark, handsome starship captain for a moment. She had known the man for four years but this had been the first time they had been equals and it had made her see him in a somewhat different light.

She would have lied to herself if she had said that she didn't find him attractive, had been somewhat flattered by his attention during his frequent visits to his father's space station on which she had served. Even if she had firmly pretended otherwise.

Who knew, under different circumstances, something could have happened between them. It never did and as far as she was concerned it never would. He was too much of an unapologetic playboy for her tastes, or worse, liked to pretend that he was. And then of course there was the other woman.

"Jasmine is a good friend, Terrence. You take good care of her."

He didn't seem to like where this conversation was going, judging by his hardened expression. She wasn't surprised. Terrence Glover was not quite the man to take relationship advice from anyone. "Don't worry about that," he said curtly. "What's next for you?"

"Well there was a cloak-and-dagger mission we were to take part in but it appears it that has been delayed," she said, referring to a mission she'd been given by Admiral Jonathan Owens, the head of Starfleet's enigmatic Special Affairs and Investigations department. She had been given little details on what this mission entailed exactly. A recent and highly-scrambled communiqué had made it clear not to expect further details for at least a couple of months.

Glover frowned. *"I don't care for those at all. You watch you're back out there, alright?"*

She smirked at that. *"Will do. But I have to say I'm touched by your concern, Captain."*

"Well, I shouldn't be, I suppose," he said and apparently struggled a little with what he wanted to say next. He looked away from his screen for a moment before he reestablished eye contact. *"You did pretty well for your first mission, Amaya. I wasn't quite sure if you'd pull this off but I have to say, you did well. And I'm not just talking about handling the Romulans and the Borg or the assault on the Xenarth facility. What you pulled off with the Aggregate, establishing a peace so soon after recent event was quite something."*

She grasped her chest in feigned surprise. *"A compliment from Captain Terrence Glover? Will wonders never cease?"* she said unable to suppress a smirk.

"Enough of that," he said bluntly. *"Now before I go, there is one more thing I've got to know."*

She shot him an expectant look.

"When the Borg had us dead to rights and it looked like we wouldn't have enough time to initiate the Omega weapon, the Khazara appeared out of nowhere and bought us just the time we needed."

"That's not a question."

He considered her suspiciously. *"I'm just curious to know how that came to pass. It was awfully convenient."*

She shrugged her shoulders. *"I supposed Commander Toreth simply realized she had too much to lose and nothing to gain if she didn't interfere."*

Glover clearly wasn't entirely satisfied with that explanation, sensing that there was more to that story. The look in Maya's eyes gave proof that she had nothing further to share on that subject and he decided to drop it. *"Perhaps you're right,"* he said. *"Take care of yourself, Maya. I'm confident our paths will cross again."*

"Small galaxy."

"Glover out."

She leaned back in her chair once his face had vanished from the small screen.

"He didn't buy that, you know?"

She looked passed the screen to see Vej sitting on her sofa, considering her carefully.

Maya nodded. "I know."

"And neither do I."

She offered him a little mischievous smile. "What'cha gonna do? A girl's gotta have her secrets."

The counselor nodded and just like Glover understood that she was not quite ready to tell him everything. "Fair enough. So," he went on, "your first mission behind you, how do you feel about it?"

She considered that question for a moment, her eyes lost in empty space. "I think I feel pretty good."

"Oh?"

Maya looked his way. "Don't sound so surprised."

"I suppose I'm just worried about my job," he said. "If you start to feel good about everything you do, what's the point of having me around?"

She uttered a little laugh. "Don't worry, you're part of the furniture now."

"Just what I always wanted to be."

She sounded more serious when she spoke again. "Don't get me wrong, it's not as if I'm happy about everything that's happened. There are thirty-eight condolence letters I'll have to write and I can't even tell those families what exactly it was their sons or daughters died for seeing that the Omega Directive is all hush-hush. I may have been naïve but thirty-eight is a lot more I'd ever think I'd ever have to send.

I nearly fell apart on Zenith when I had to make the decision to leave Mer'iab and his team behind, possibly sealing their fate. And I can't help thinking that if I'd given the order to use lethal force earlier, maybe those casualty numbers would have been halved."

"Yes but you'd have a lot more dead Xenarth on your hand. Maybe too many to establish peaceful relations the way you did."

She nodded. "I know. And I keep telling myself all that. I keep telling myself that the assault was a necessity to keep the Xenarth from threatening subspace throughout the quadrant. I keep telling myself that if we hadn't weaponized Omega the way we did, we'd all be dead now and with the Borg in control of the most powerful force in the galaxy. I keep telling myself if we hadn't taken the actions we did, we would never have achieved a peaceful arrangement with Xenarth Aggregate. So, I'm telling myself that regardless of all that has happened, regardless of how much it hurts to know of the good people I've lost, that all things considered, I should feel pretty good about it all."

Vej stood from the sofa. "No."

She aimed a puzzled look at the man. "No?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't think it's healthy and I don't think it's what a captain should feel at all. I don't think you should pretend otherwise."

"As a captain I need to be a beacon of strength for the crew," she countered. "Sometimes that means pretending to be strong."

"Sure, out there, that may be right, but not in here."

"So what, you want me to feel bad about things, is that it?"

"I want you to be honest about the way you feel. Especially to yourself."

"What if I can't take that?"

He sat down in one of the chairs opposite her desk. "Then that's what you got me for."

She uttered a heavy sigh and then after a moment made eye contact with the counselor. "Did I tell you yet that you can be a real downer?"

He offered a smirk. "On more than one occasion."

Maya nodded slowly. "Okay then, how do I process this? How do I live with what I've done if I'm not allowed to pretend to be alright with it?"

"You ask yourself if knowing everything you do now, in complete hindsight, would you do things the same way again?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation.

Vej smiled at that. "And that is what you can feel good about."

"Damn," she said and found his eyes again. "You are good."

"No longer just part of the furniture then, huh?"

"You know what I really feel good about, what I think I've realized after all of this? It's that I'm truly looking forward to being the captain of this ship. I feel I've faced my greatest challenge. We all have. What's the worst the universe can throw at us now?"

"You really don't want to go around and jinx things like that."

She smiled broadly. "You're my counselor. A man of science and medicine and you believe in jinxes?"

He shrugged. "I believe in not tempting fate."

"Fair enough."

"Any more insights on what happened to you when you were passed out? Who this mystery person was you said you thought you encountered."

She nodded. "I've given it some thought," she said and then turned the computer on top of her desk so that he could see the screen.

His eyes opened noticeably when he spotted the image of an almost regal looking, middle-aged Starfleet officer in an old-style, golden uniform shirt. "Seriously? Is that possible? The man must have died decades ago," he said and then looked back up at her. "Are you sure?"

"Sure? No," she said with a quick headshake. "But after that episode I was almost compelled to go back and revisit some of his log entries. And just listening to him talk, with my eyes closed, it sounded almost as if he was speaking straight to me. I could see his face clear as day as if he was standing as close to me as you are now. Like I've actually met him in person once even though I know for a fact I never did."

"Did those logs give any indication that such a meeting could have taken place?"

"From the sound of his voice, I do think something else happened to him on New Xenarth when he and his crew came close to being wiped out by the Omega molecules. Maybe even something he didn't quite understand himself."

"Just like with you."

"Yes. And there are other logs as well. From his first officer, his science chief, even his doctor, but most of the ones that could offer any clues to what really happened have been so heavily redacted and classified that I can't access them even with my security clearance," she said, clearly sounding frustrated at the prospect of not being able to learn the full story.

"Take it from a man whose job it is dealing with the truth. Sometimes it's better not to know."

"I'll have to take your word for it," she said with a little shrug and then turned the screen back face her.

Not a moment later a soft chime from the device on her desk caused her to focus her attention on it again. Her face noticeably darkened.

"Bad news?"

"Huh?"

"That message you got," he said with a raised eyebrow. "Who is it from?"

She looked up at him with an obviously unfocused look in her eyes. She quickly recovered. "Sometimes it's better not to know."

He got the drift and smoothly left his chair. "Touché. I'll leave you to it," he said and promptly left the ready room.

Maya took a deep breath and then opened the comm. channel. She was greeted by the face of a Romulan woman.

"Commander Toreth."

"I suppose congratulations are in order, Captain. I don't entirely know how you pulled it off but it looks as if we're all still here. Not something the Borg can claim."

She nodded.

"Of course your success would not have been possible without my timely intervention."

"And I'm sincerely grateful for your actions, Commander."

"Your gratitude is noted but not quite sufficient," the Romulan woman said.

"What do you want?"

"We had a deal, I sincerely hope you are not reneging on it now. My opinion of Starfleet officers is already low enough as it is."

Maya considered her sternly. "I have every intention on keeping my side of the bargain."

"Good," she said. *"I'm looking forward to calling in your debt, Captain."*

"As long as you understand that there is no circumstance imaginable in which I would compromise my orders or the oath I've sworn to uphold the safety and security of the Federation, my ship and my crew."

The woman chuckled at that. *"Don't be so melodramatic, Captain. Believe it or not I would not have been interested in any kind of arrangement with you had I suspected you a traitor. I may care little for your precious Federation but I despise a turncoat even more."*

Maya nodded slowly. "So what is it you expect me to do for you, Commander?"

"Oh, I'm sure I'll think of something. You'll know when the time comes. And Captain, I expect people to pay up their debts in full."

"You won't have to worry about that."

"I hope not."

The two starship commanders quietly considered each other for a moment after they had reached the agreement. It was Toreth who spoke again first. *"I don't know if anyone has told you this,"* she said. *"But for your first time in that chair I think you handled yourself quite well considering what you were up against. You could have made a real mess of things."*

Bad enough she'd heard this from Terrence Glover but to get the well-done speech from a Romulan captain was the last thing she had wanted to hear.

"I'll be in touch, Captain Donners."

And with that the screen blinked out.

Amaya uttered a sigh as she let herself drop back into her chair.

She heard a sharp hiss coming from her right and when she turned she found that Cosmo had awoken from his afternoon nap, his bright yellow eyes focused on her with what could have been interpreted as a scolding look.

"I know what you're thinking," she told her wildcat pet. "I've made a deal with the devil. Let's just hope the payment won't cost me my soul."

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