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# CRY HAVOC



THE FATE OF THE ENTIRE GALAXY RESTS  
ON THE OUTCOME OF ONE LAST STAND

# CRY HAVOC

**THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES #3**

BASED UPON 'STAR TREK®'

BASED UPON “STAR TREK®” CREATED BY  
**Gene Roddenberry**

“THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES” WRITTEN AND CREATED BY  
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## PROLOGUE

War had a bad reputation.

It was commonly referred to as a bringer of pain and suffering, and misery. It destroyed life with little prejudice, its final aim always destruction, its objective always to conquer or to destroy. It was an altogether heartless, cold, and brutal affair that above all favored the stronger and more determined side. Those who didn't perish, those few who seemed fortunate enough to survive a long and bitter conflict, oftentimes would never be able to forget the horrors they had witnessed or the friends and loved ones they had lost. Instead, they would carry with them the deep scars of war for the remainder of their lives. Nobody seemed to want war and yet few generations were spared from it.

Wegnour was well aware of this reputation.

He knew that many of the races in the Alpha Quadrant had exactly this attitude toward war. It was their greatest weakness.

Above all else they lacked faith.

Faith that war was not a bad thing. He knew from long-learned experience that war was a glorious undertaking. It was of course only a means to an end. War was chaos but chaos was a necessity to establish order. And order was everything. Nobody understood this better than Wegnour.

Without order the universe would simply fall apart. Without order any sentient species was no better than a bunch of savages. Without order there could be no progress, no technology, no culture or industry, nor in fact anything worth living for. Order meant peace for all and for exactly that reason war was nothing less than a glorious undertaking. The logic of it was undeniable. It was, after all, the Founders' logic. And the Founders

were order and more. They were gods. The enemy didn't seem to understand this concept but that was hardly surprising.

They lacked faith.

The war with the Federation had been in full swing for over a month now and as predicted by the Founders, their enemy was retreating on all fronts. It was true that the campaign to bring order to the Alpha and Beta Quadrants had been one of the grandest undertakings in the history of the Dominion and it had become quickly apparent that nobody would be able to stop them. Within a few more months, Wegnour speculated, Earth and Qu'noS would be conquered and after that, it was only a matter of time until order had spread throughout both quadrants.

"We have achieved our destination."

The Vorta was ripped out of his thoughts by the booming voice of First Telaka'clan, the leader of the Jem'Hadar squadron under his command. Physically 'Clan was a credit to his race. The genetically-engineered super soldier stood nearly two meters tall, with wide shoulders, and a muscle-covered body perfectly trimmed to be a killing machine. His hard eyes, gray skin, and pebble-like ridges protruding through his skull were all designed for one reason. To make the enemy tremble at his sight. And they did. Wegnour, of course, had no such trepidations. The Jem'Hadar were his servants, programmed to follow his every command. It was the will of the Founders; it was the order of things.

"What is our plan of engagement?"

Wegnour frowned. Even though Telaka'clan was a flawless killer and leader to his men, his attitude toward authority, toward his authority, in particular, was not nearly as perfect. Wegnour believed this to be due to an impurity in his genetic makeup. Such inconveniences were to be expected when cloning thousands of warriors in mere weeks. Whatever his flaws, Wegnour would need to rely on his strength and battle experience. And the

strictly rationed ketracel-white drug would ensure his total obedience. The Jem'Hadar soldier's imperfection was nothing but a minor complication to an otherwise flawless plan.

"You must not concern yourself with the arrangement," he said while putting on a headset that allowed him to get a visual of the ship's surroundings. As expected, he found what he had been looking for. "All you need to do is to follow my orders to the letter."

"I must know our first step to prepare the men."

Wegnour turned to face the Jem'Hadar, doing his level best to hide his irritation. "I am the Vorta, you are the Jem'Hadar. I will tell you exactly what you need to know and nothing more. It is the will of the Founders. You wouldn't want to defy the Founders, would you?"

"No," came the prompt reply.

Wegnour smiled. Perhaps he had misjudged the Jem'Hadar leader. After all, he was still young, especially for a First. Less than six years old and yet he had seen plenty of combat. He had not been a First for long and he lacked experience dealing directly with the Vorta.

"Of course not. Prepare your men for a landing mission. And do not worry, you will face the enemy soon enough."

The First nodded. It was obvious from the gleam in his eye that he was more than ready to fight. To do the thing that he had been born to do.

As he turned to ready his men, Wegnour spoke again. "This war has barely begun but our efforts here will ensure that it will soon come to an end. Thanks entirely to the wisdom of the Founders we will be victorious once again."

"Victory is life," all the Jem'Hadar echoed in unison.

Wegnour's lips curled up into a smile once more as he enjoyed the booming choir of voices filling the command center of the ship. He smiled because he knew every single word he had spoken was the truth. The Federation, the Klingons, and all the others, they wouldn't even realize what had been unleashed onto them until long after their utter destruction.

"Yes, yes it is, indeed."

\* \* \*

A million billion stars dotted the immeasurable vastness of space. In that incredible abundance of planets, it seemed impossible that any single one could hold such significance that people of all races were willing to fight and die for them. And yet they did so now more than they had ever done before. Even in such places that appeared to be void of any noteworthy resources or strategic values.

A blast of orange and red light shot across the serenity of space in one of such places. It was quickly followed by another and was answered by a dozen bursts of cobalt-colored energy lances. Various beams of destructive energy created a striking visual of light and color in this dark pocket of space. But there was nothing beautiful about this. It was nothing less than a battle for the right of existence.

Three gray, bug-shaped attack ships had their sights firmly set on a single starship. The vessel under attack, with its sharp, streamlined look and large saucer-shaped front, possessed an awesome arsenal of deadly weapons. The Jem'Hadar fighters, however, like the soldiers commanding them, had been designed for one purpose and one purpose alone. To destroy. The odds may not have been in *Agamemnon*'s favor but the sturdy ship showed no signs of giving up. Like a cornered animal it unleashed its

fury left and right, more often than not connecting with the pack of predators tightly on its heels.

But the Jem'Hadar's poloron beams and torpedoes were beginning to take their toll. *Agamemnon*'s aft shields were dangerously close to buckling and the attackers were not letting up. On the contrary, they increased their efforts to overpower the ship's protective shields by escalating their rate of fire. With the shields gone, the Jem'Hadar weapons would easily be able to slice through *Agamemnon*'s exposed hull, sending her to her inevitable doom.

The Federation ship banked sharply to starboard so suddenly that only one of the pursuing attackers could adjust in time. It would take less than a minute for the additional two attack ships to be back in the fight but in battles like these, mere seconds could make the difference between victory and defeat.

The battered ship took full advantage of the few moments that had shifted the fight in its favor. The six quantum torpedoes catapulted out of *Agamemnon*'s aft launcher were dead on target. The first three anti-matter-filled projectiles exploded against their attacker's shields, obliterating them in the process while the last torpedoes impacted directly with the hull. It was the last one that dealt the death knell. It bore itself deep into the ship and ripped it to pieces from the inside out. Only dead and burning debris remained.

The victory was short-lived. The two remaining attack vessels had promptly changed course and made a rapid beeline for the ailing Starfleet ship, their beam emitters firing relentlessly.

*Agamemnon* tried desperately to roll away from the incoming fire to shield its weakened dorsal section from the attack. She wasn't fast enough. The super-charged beams collapsed their shields in mere instances. By the time the second attacker had fired, *Agamemnon* had managed to flip over

completely, protecting its weakest spot. The next blasts of energy sliced their way across the ship's belly, leaving behind deep cuts that almost immediately began to bleed plasma and oxygen. The lethal combination quickly caught fire only to be put out seconds later by the empty vacuum of space.

The damage was significant nevertheless; the hull had been breached and was now utterly exposed. Emergency force fields snapped into place to maintain the ship's atmosphere and structural integrity but not before three unfortunate crewmen were blown into space.

The bridge was dead silent.

Captain Amaya Donners knew that the last hit had been bad. Since the very beginning of the war, *Agamemnon* had been in battle with little pause and she had quickly learned to read the shudders and jolts that coursed through her ship. *Agamemnon* was still a relatively new vessel—just two years out of the shipyard—she knew that in this war her ship would age months for every single day under fire.

She afforded herself a few seconds to look around her bridge. All her officers were entirely focused on the battle, a few consoles were dark due to a recent power loss but all in all the bridge was in fairly good condition still. The real damage was on the opposite side of the ship and it was more than enough to doom *Agamemnon* and her four hundred sixty crewmembers.

She had always dreamed of having her own ship and for the last two years that dream had been reality. She had come to think of the brave men and women under her command as her extended family. She had nothing but love and admiration for those who served under her. But the war had made her dreams turn into nightmares. She had seen her ship suffer and

her people die and every day she knew she was getting closer to the moment she'd lose everything.

Today could be that day.

"Hull breaches on deck twenty-four, twenty-three, and twenty-two, emergency force fields are in place. Casualty reports are coming in from all decks," said the ship's Bolian first officer, his voice cutting through the momentary silence that had existed only in the captain's mind.

"Transfer all auxiliary power to the shields. Helm, hold your heading. Tactical, stand by to fire all weapons."

The bridge shook again. She had to fight to remain seated in her chair.

Come on, baby, hold together just a little longer.

Just a little longer was all she needed, she thought.

As she had expected, the Jem'Hadar ship that had sliced open *Agamemnon* just seconds before was now diving up from under the ship and coming directly into their main cone of fire.

Time for payback.

"Fire."

*Agamemnon* unleashed everything she had. Phaser beams, quantum torpedoes, even high-yield and precious tri-cobalt devices were sacrificed to quickly do away with the enemy and in hopes of finally evening the odds.

Nearly all of the devastatingly destructive force found its target.

The enemy's shields were no match for such a concentrated and vicious attack and quickly buckled. The crimson-red phaser beams sliced through the hull as though it was made of paper. Explosions quickly followed, then the attack ship lost all attitudinal control and began to spin wildly out of control. Soon all that was left was a burned-out, empty husk of a ship.

But the odds were not yet even.

Not even close. *Agamemnon* was limping; her impulse engines had taken a beating and barely managed to keep the large vessel moving at all. Half the phaser banks and torpedo launchers had lost power after that last desperate attack and *Agamemnon*'s shields were nearly non-existent. The third and final Jem'Hadar attack ship on the other hand was in near-perfect condition still. It had stayed clear of the battle until now and for good reason, as it now appeared. The Starfleet vessel had fought valiantly, dishing out far more damage than it had absorbed but in the end, it hadn't been enough.

The bug-shaped ship came about, setting its sight determinedly onto *Agamemnon*. Its own shields easily absorbed the two desperate phaser barrages hurled its way.

It didn't deter the Jem'Hadar in the least and they continued to close in on their prey. The final strike would be close and personal. No mistakes. *Agamemnon* was destined to come to a violent end.

## I – WAR

Amaya Donners was completely sated and judging from what she could see around the table, so were her dinner companions.

She placed her utensils onto the plate and wiped her mouth with a napkin. Directly opposite her sat the young and attractive Tenerian, DeMara Deen but it wasn't her spellbinding appearance that had captured her attention. It was another beauty she was focused on and she never grew tired of looking at her.

Behind Deen, through the large windows of the room, she spotted *Agamemnon*. She had taken a terrible beating but most of the damage had already been attended to. If nothing else, this war had made them all extremely proficient in quickly assessing and repairing damaged systems. All their lives depended on it.

Lieutenant Deen noticed the captain's gaze. "How are the repairs coming?"

Donners nodded. "Quite well. All main systems are back online including shields and weapons," she said as she returned her focus to the present company that also included their host; Michael Owens, captain of the USS *Eagle*, and his first officer Commander Eugene Edison. "It's the ugly scars I'm worried about."

"I doubt we'll have time for paint jobs," Owens said with a smile. For the last few weeks, *Eagle* and *Agamemnon* had been patrolling this sector of space close to the Romulan border and so far they had encountered enemy vessels on a near-constant basis.

Owens' smile wasn't as bright as it used to be. The toll of constant battle was beginning to show on his face. So far, the two starships together had

lost over twenty crewmen and morale was plunging deeper with every attack. And the news from the frontlines was equally discouraging. The Federation was being driven back by the combined Cardassian and Dominion forces, taking higher losses than in any previous war the Federation had been involved in.

"If you hadn't shown up when you did, we would have to worry about a lot more than cosmetic damage. You arrived in the very nick of time."

Owens stood up and retrieved a dark green bottle from a nearby cabinet. "I was going to save this for our next anniversary," he said, referring to the tradition of celebrating each completed year *Eagle* was in service.

Donners nodded. She was familiar with the ritual. Owens had decided to continue it from his former commanding officer on the *Columbia*. She had served on the same ship for five years herself before Owens had come aboard as the first officer.

"But I think today is a good enough reason to celebrate," he said and opened the bottle of Saurian brandy, the distinctly zesty aroma of the infamous beverage quickly filling the room.

Donners and the others gathered their glasses and *Eagle*'s captain didn't hesitate to fill them, leaving his for last.

"To the nick of time," he said, raising his glass.

"To the nick of time," she replied, toasting with the others.

Both Deen and Edison noticed the look in Owens' eyes as he watched Donners finish her brandy. They were old friends, of course, but it wasn't difficult to tell that there was more going on between them. The look

vanished from his face before the ebony-skinned captain of the *Agamemnon* could spot it.

"Have you spoken to Throl lately?" she said, referring to the admiral currently in command of the Twelfth Fleet to which both *Eagle* and *Agamemnon* had been assigned to.

He shook his head. "No, have you?"

"Not since last weeks when he barely escaped a Dominion onslaught in the Argus sector. Things must be going a lot worse than the official news feeds make out if Throl is getting caught up that close to the frontlines."

"That is difficult to believe," Deen said. "Those reports are pretty grim."

Edison took the final sip from his brandy. "I hate to even think it but we just can't afford to fight this war the way we have in the past. We need *something* and we need it soon."

"Something?" said Deen.

"An edge. Something, anything, to shift the things in our favor," said Owens and found both Donners and Edison nod in agreement.

"Like what?"

"That is exactly the question that most Starfleet tacticians are currently pondering, I reckon," the first officer said.

"We've been through bad times before," said Deen. She was the eternal optimist by nature. Her people had never seen war in their history and she had always found it difficult to grasp the concept. Even now, after weeks of grueling warfare, she was not willing to give up on her worldview which had served her for so long. "The Romulans, the

Tzenkethi, the Cardassians, the Borg, the Klingons; the Federation has faced them all in battle and we're still here."

The dark-haired captain of the *Agamemnon* shook her head. "Those wars were different; we never faced such a determined enemy before."

"The Borg were fairly determined," the Tenarian said.

"There is no denying that. I lost more than one good friend at 359," the British first officer said. His voice took on a sad tone as he remembered the many comrades he had lost in just one day. Starfleet's first significant confrontation with the cyborg race had lasted only a few hours and yet had been one of the single most devastating attacks in Federation history. That was until the Dominion had decided to outdo the Borg and the destruction they had caused.

"As awful as the Borg were, they never put as much dedication into their efforts of conquering the Alpha Quadrant as the Dominion has," said Owens and looked at Deen. "Yes, we came close to the brink a couple of times with the Borg but we managed to defeat them swiftly each time. The Dominion, however, will not stop until we surrender or there's nobody left who can."

Donners nodded sadly.

"Let's change the subject," Owens said as he felt the mood around the table taking a dive. "There's plenty of war waiting for us after dinner."

"I second that," said Deen with a smile.

"What gets me through these times is to imagine what exactly I'm going to do when all this is over," said Edison, refilling his glass.

"Let me guess," Deen said. "Risa?"

The first officer shook his head. "Not quite."

"I figure it be pretty crowded there anyway," said Donners taking another sip of her drink.

"Exactly. Better to avoid the tourist traps altogether. I was thinking along the lines of the Scottish Highlands. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more breathtaking place in all the galaxy."

"Perhaps," Donners said, "But I don't think the climate agrees with me. My first shore leave will be spent somewhere with a lot more sun. And beaches, long, beautiful beaches. Someplace like—"

"Jamaica," Owens and Donners said at the same time, causing them to share a laugh.

"So, it is true," Edison said, smirking. "Captains do all think alike."

"When we were back at the Academy, we spent several fun-filled weekends in the Caribbean," Owens said, enjoying the nostalgia that swept over him, taking him back to a simpler and much more pleasant time.

Judging from her knowing smile, Donner's thoughts were in a similar place. "The stories I could tell you about your captain while he was a cadet."

"Please, don't hold anything back," Eugene said, his interest piqued.

Owens gave Donners a stern look. "You swore yourself to secrecy."

"Well," she said and took a deep, dramatic breath as Michael Owens continued to watch her carefully.

"As much as I would love to stay and hear about this," said Deen suddenly. "There are several reports I need to finish today," she said and placed her napkin from her lap onto the table.

Edison shot her a surprised glance. "I was looking forward to hearing this."

She shrugged her shoulders as if entirely clueless as to what she had done.

Donners slowly exhaled. "That's quite all right," she said. "Your captain knows an equal number of embarrassing stories about me. Knowing him he would get his revenge by telling every single one of them to my crew."

"Never," said Owens with a sarcastic smile.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to spoil your fun," Deen said and stood.

Owens gave Deen an incredulous look. He had known the young Tenarian for a long time and for some reason, he didn't buy her excuse at all. Something in her tone gave her away. Nobody else seemed to notice.

"I have a staff meeting I should get ready for as well," the first officer said and also stood, turning to Donners. "It was a pleasure meeting you." He had heard much about Amaya Donners from Owens but he had never met her before this evening. She had not been a disappointment and he was sure she was the most charming, not to mention the most gorgeous Starfleet captain he had ever met. Even before they had all sat down for dinner together, she had insisted that they forgo the use of ranks and titles and he had happily complied.

"The pleasure was mine, Gene. The best of luck to you."

"To all of us," said Edison, gave a quick nod to his own captain and Deen, and then left Owens' quarters.

"That reminds me," said Donners. "I really should check in with Agamemnon."

Owens nodded and pointed at a nearby door. "Use the bedroom."

Donners smiled at Deen and then stepped away.

As soon as the doors had closed behind her, Owens turned to Deen. "Something bothering you?"

"No, why?"

"Call it a hunch."

She shook her head.

For just a moment, an uncomfortable silence filled the room. It was rare for there to be awkward silences between Owens and Deen for as long as they had known each other. They had both always prided themselves that they could talk to each other about virtually anything.

It was Owens who ultimately broke it. "You mentioned some reports."

"Yes," said Deen absent-mindedly but then looked straight into his eyes. "Did you speak to Amaya about Frobisher yet?"

Owens stiffened immediately at the mention of the man who had killed his brother. But not just because of the terrible things he had done to him and his family but also because he had never told Amaya Donners how Doctor Frobisher's insane experiment had altered the timeline and as a result their relationship as well.

"Honestly, I still don't know how to."

"You need to tell her. She deserves to know."

"Why? Why can't she just remain unaware of the mistakes that I've made in the past that hurt her so much? They've become irrelevant, they've never happened."

Deen didn't know all the details of what had transpired between Owens and Donners in that different timeline. All she knew for certain was that Donners had hated him once. But after Owens and Deen had returned from

their unintentional trip into the past, their relationship had suddenly been cordial; romantic even. "You owe her."

Owens considered her for a moment. He couldn't quite understand why she was so determined for him to tell Donners about something that seemed to matter so little now. He finally nodded slowly. "I will try."

Deen seemed somewhat satisfied with that answer. "I'll leave you to it then," she said and began to walk toward the exit. But she stopped and turned back around before reaching the doors. "Be brave," she said with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

The doors to his bedroom opened and Donners returned. "Be brave about what?"

"Oh," Deen said, slightly blushing. "You know, in the face of adversity, the war, the Dominion."

Lying didn't come easy to Deen, and Donners could tell. "Sure. Always a pleasure, Dee."

The Tenarian exchanged another look with Owens and then left the quarters.

"Is it just my imagination or is DeMara acting somewhat strange today?"

"I don't think it's your imagination," he said almost to himself, his eyes remaining glued to the now-closed doors. "This war, it's getting to all of us."

Donners nodded sadly. "Ain't that the truth? I hate to think what it will do to her though. She's," she paused to think of the right words, "too delicate for this ugly kind of business."

Owens took a step closer to her. "I wouldn't worry too much about her. She is tougher than people give her credit for. How are things on your ship?"

"I like to think that things fall apart over there when I'm not around. The truth is they're all extremely capable," she said, smiling broadly.

"It's hard to accept that we're not as indispensable as we like to think."

Donners approached the window to get a better look at her ship. She took in the sight for a moment. "Yeah well, at least I take comfort in the fact that we're all unique. Not some replaceable clones like the Jem'Hadar, designed and manufactured in a lab with a hundred thousand versions just like them," she said, her eyes never leaving the window.

Owens frowned slightly as he considered how to make the transition to what he needed to tell her.

She turned back to him. "Now here I go ruining everyone's mood again," she said with a chuckle. She became more serious when she noticed his determined expression. "What's wrong?"

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you."

Her eyebrows rose expectantly.

"But I'm not sure where to start."

"Try the beginning."

"Yeah, I guess that would make sense."

She took a step closer. "Is this one of those conversations where I better sit down?"

Owens nodded slowly.

"If I can take the Dominion, I can take whatever you've decided to heap on me," she said but took the seat.

Owens forced a little smile onto his lips but he remained on his feet. "You remember our mission to Farga a few months ago?"

"Of course," she said. "You went after Doctor Frobisher, your brother's killer."

He nodded and turned away and toward the window. "Could you imagine a situation in which you would feel very differently about me than you do now?"

Donners' cheeks reddened slightly. He couldn't tell if it was an after-effect of the Saurian brandy or something else. "Well, I'm not sure how to answer that, maybe if you -"

He didn't let her finish. "Hate me even?"

She stood. "Hate you?" It hadn't been what she had expected. "Why would I hate you?"

He turned to face her again. "Because of something very stupid that I've done. Might have done, or ... would have done, or ... I don't know," he said with frustration. Talking about different timelines gave him a terrible headache.

"You're not making a lot of sense here, Michael," she said and took a step forward. "If you think I'm going to hate you for something that you did -"

"No, it's not that. Well, not quite."

"Just tell me already."

"It has to do with," he interrupted himself when he saw her eyes opening wide and he was certain it was not because of him. Something else

had captured her attention. He whipped around and immediately noticed that something had appeared in the distance. It was too far away to make out clearly but he knew instantly that it wasn't a good sign. His fears were confirmed just a second later.

The unmistakable hauling of the red alert klaxons filled his quarters.

"Red Alert, four enemy vessels are approaching our coordinates." It was the voice of Eagle's Vulcan science officer that boomed over the intercom. "Senior officers report to your stations. Captain to the bridge."

Donners didn't waste any time. "Rain check?" she said before tapping the combadge on her chest. "Donners to *Agamamnon*. One person to beam over."

"Take care," he almost whispered.

Donners had just enough time for one small nod before she was engulfed in bright blue light. A moment later she had completely disappeared.

Michael Owens headed straight out of the door and toward the bridge. All the while trying desperately to figure out the odds for two damaged starships to fight off four Jem'Hadar attack vessels. He gave up even before he had reached the bridge. The numbers were too discouraging.

\* \* \*

Commander Eugene Edison had been in enough battles to know that this was a bad one.

The Jem'Hadar ships had come out of seemingly nowhere, using a nearby asteroid field to hide their approach. And *Eagle* and *Agamemnon* had made an inviting target. Both ships had still been undergoing repairs from the previous skirmish when the enemy attacked. Even though their main systems: shields, weapons, and engines were fully functional, they were not yet operating at peak efficiency. And the Jem'Hadar knew this. Their attack had been aggressive and targeted the Starfleet vessel's most vulnerable areas. *Eagle* and her companion had been in a defensive struggle from the moment the fight had begun.

Edison held on to the armrests of his chair as the bridge shook violently under the incoming fire. As the first officer, one of his main responsibilities was the crew itself and so he allowed himself a quick look around the bridge with well-practiced ease in order to assess the situation, ensuring nobody had been harmed and everyone was focused on the task at hand.

The young Trill officer, Ensign Lutira Rei was currently manning the operations station. Her raven black hair had come loose of its tight bun and fell into her round face. Rei had come right out of the Academy no two years ago. Edison had always liked her energy and dedication. She had been naïve and inexperienced when she had come aboard but had lost much of that in the last few weeks. She was not supposed to be at that station, however. Edison did not know why Lieutenant Deen had not made it to the bridge yet but he had no time to investigate. He was determined to do so as soon as the current threat had passed.

"We've lost ventral thrusters. The lead vessel is coming around for another pass," said the un-joined Trill as she pushed a loose strand of hair out of her face.

Next to her, Edison could see Lieutenant Lif Culsten hard at work trying to keep *Eagle* out of the firing cone of the two enemy ships that seemed to be perpetually stuck on their tail. His fingers raced across the

console faster than those of most humans could, including his own, he was sure. The copper-skinned Krellonian possessed a superior nervous system that allowed for increased reflexes. A trait that came in very handy when maneuvering a three-million-ton starship in battle. At the moment, Culsten's reflexes were the only thing keeping *Eagle* in one piece but they were not enough to keep the ship from taking one big hit after another.

"They're slippery and we're too sluggish," he said with frustration in his voice. "I can't maintain a firing position."

Edison stood and turned to look at the half-Romulan tactical officer who stood at his elevated station behind him. "Torpedoes?"

Leva shook his head. "Too close."

He considered Leva to be one of the best tactical officers he had ever known. And Edison knew a few things about tactics himself. Leva was a fascinating man and a near-unique anomaly among Federation citizens. The offspring of a Romulan diplomat and a human liaison officer, Edison knew that he had always been conflicted about his heritage until he had joined Starfleet. On *Eagle*, he had become one of his most valuable officers. Although he could not deny his disappointment over his performance in the last few weeks. He was certain that he was capable of much more. This was a hell of a bad time for the tactical officer to lose his edge, he thought.

"Impulse burst."

Edison looked up to find that the remark had come not from Leva but from a beast of a man. Or at least that was the impression one could have perceived by looking at Lieutenant D'Karr. He was easily over two meters tall, towering even over the lofty Romulan, and his body was pure muscle. He was a warrior, bred for war and all Klingon. Courtesy of the Klingon Defense Force he was taking part in an exchange program designed to counter the increasing personnel shortage that was plaguing Starfleet. And he had proven to be a very resourceful officer since he had come aboard. If

there was one thing Klingons knew well it was how to do battle. He was thankful the warrior was on their side and found that his integration into the crew had been much easier than he had expected.

Edison nodded and looked toward the center seat. Captain Michael Owens sat in his chair, his body poised slightly forward and a tense yet focused expression on his face. His eyes were firmly fixed on the viewscreen ahead. Edison had rarely known a better captain and a more determined leader than Owens. He certainly wasn't the warrior type and a soldier by circumstance only. His strength came from his dedication to not just his ship and his crew but to the fleet and the Federation and its ideals. He knew Owens wouldn't hesitate to travel to hell and back if he had to save the Federation. As far as he was concerned, they were already halfway there.

Even though he appeared as though he had not heard a single word that had been spoken in the last few seconds, he did slightly move his head to signal his agreement. "Do it," he said without ever taking his eyes off the screen.

Edison allowed himself a glance back at the Klingon officer and noticed a disapproving look on Leva's face. He had no time to wonder about it. They needed to act quickly. "Bridge to engineering."

"*Go ahead, Commander,*" answered Lieutenant Louise Hopkins' voice promptly.

"Stand by to initiate an impulse burst. All the power you can muster."

"Understood."

A small smile crept onto his lips. Another engineer might have raised a protest at his order or at least made a discouraging remark about straining the engines too much. Not so Hopkins, *Eagle*'s resident

engineering genius. She was with no doubt the most proficient engineer on the ship and at a surprisingly young age as well. Unfortunately, her talents came at a price. She was extremely insecure and apprehensive outside her engineering room. If it wasn't for her technical expertise, Edison was sure she would have made a poor officer. But this merely meant that he had his work cut out for him. He would mold her into an exemplary Starfleet crewmember. Sadly, the war would require everyone to toughen up and learn the hard way that weaknesses had to be conquered quickly.

"Lieutenant?" he said, addressing Culsten at the helm.

"Ready."

Edison glanced at Owens.

"Go," the captain said simply.

*Eagle*'s bridge shuddered slightly as the internal dampening field failed to compensate quickly enough for the sudden burst of speed. Like a jet plane's afterburner of long-forgotten wars, the engines delivered one powerful forward push that catapulted the ship a few thousand kilometers away from its pursuing enemy.

Edison didn't need to check his instruments. He knew from looking at the viewscreen that they had achieved the distance necessary to perform their counterattack. He whipped around to face Leva. "Quantum torpedoes, full spread."

"Torpedoes away."

The bridge crew held their collective breath as eight blue blooms of lights crossed the viewscreen, quickly closing on their target. A bright explosion filled the viewer no three seconds later.

"Direct hit," Rei said with barely concealed exhilaration and swiveled around in her chair. "The Jem'Hadar ship has been destroyed."

"Contain your excitement until the end of the battle, Ensign," Edison said more sternly than he had wanted to. He quickly regretted it when he noticed the disappointed look on the young Trill's face but he needed her to remain focused. This was not over yet.

"Yes, sir," she said and quickly turned back to her station.

"Come about to two-seven-five mark seven-five, full power to forward shields," said Owens, sounding slightly more relaxed.

Edison felt his mood improve as well. The tide of the battle had finally turned; *Eagle* could now shift onto the offensive.

"Sir, I ..." Rei didn't continue, instead she began to frantically operate her console.

Edison quickly stepped up next to her. "What is it, Ensign," he said, making an effort to sound softer than he had before.

"I lost sensor contact with the second Jem'Hadar vessel."

The first officer shot a glance at the Romulan. "Tactical?"

Leva quickly turned to his controls. "They were there just a few seconds ago. Stand by."

Owens stood from his chair, pure frustration evident on his face. "Come on people, find me that ship."

"I've got it," D'Karr shouted across the bridge. "Coordinates: one-seven-eight mark one-eight-one. They are using a double-phased shield modulation to fool our sensors."

Rei looked helplessly at the first officer at her side. She didn't understand.

Edison lowered himself slightly to access her console. "They're re-modulating their shield frequency so quickly that the sensors can't lock on to them, it's a dirty trick. Set your scans to a rapid modulation setting," he said and quickly activated a series of panels. "Here that should do it."

Rei nodded. "Got it, thanks."

"You're doing fine," he said with a reaffirming smile.

"They're coming in hot," Culsten said as soon as he had adjusted his sensors.

Owens could see the incoming threat from the console inside his armrest. "Evasive, hard to starboard."

Edison tried to get back to his seat to brace himself. He was not fast enough.

The bridge heaved as though caught in the epicenter of an enormous earthquake. Most standing crew members were thrown to the floor. Two consoles exploded immediately, showering the bridge with sparks and debris. By the time Edison managed to get back to his feet, he realized that the operations console had been one of them. The seat was empty and Lutira Rei lay sprawled out on the deck not far from him.

In the aft part of the bridge, another blown console had caused no casualties but it had catapulted Leva to the floor and away from his station. D'Karr had managed to remain on his feet and offered Leva his hand to help him off the deck.

"I can manage," he said and returned to his station, leaving the Klingon. If he was irritated by the Romulan's behavior he didn't show it.

"Damage report," Owens said.

"Shields have failed momentarily but are back to twenty percent power," Leva replied. "We have hull breaches on decks six, nine, and fifteen. Emergency force fields are in place."

Edison had made a beeline for the fallen Trill ensign and checked her neck for a pulse. He found it but it was faint. Her eyes were wide open but did not move.

"Do we need medical?" Owens said.

Edison turned to the captain, giving him an empty look. He heard the ensign cough and quickly returned his attention to her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered her eyes now drilling into the first officer.

He quickly shook his head. "You did fine," he said reassuringly.

"I ... let you down," she said barely audible. Blood was coming out of her mouth now. Edison knew instantly that all help would come too late for the young woman. But he didn't want to give up on her.

"You'll be all right, Ensign."

"Medical emergency on the bridge."

He barely heard the captain's voice, his complete attention directed at the dying eyes of Ensign Rei.

She nodded ever so barely.

He picked up her head. "You did just fine, Lutira."

Edison would never know if she had heard his last words or not. He allowed himself another second before he quickly moved on. This was not the time to mourn the dead. Instead, he promptly took a seat at the now vacant operations console.

"Fire at will," said Owens.

Seconds later, a barrage of phaser fire and torpedoes was slung toward the passing Jem'Hadar attack ship. Edison looked down at his console, relieved that more than half of the displays and panels were still operational. The instruments quickly confirmed what he had hoped for. Their assault was devastating mostly thanks to the fact that Culsten had managed to maneuver *Eagle* into an ideal firing position and maintained it throughout their evasive attempts.

"Their shields are buckling," Leva said without revealing much emotion in his voice.

On the screen, a bright flare signaled the demise of the enemy's protective shields, and moments later their weapons began to pound away at their armor. It would prove no match for *Eagle*'s firepower. The phasers and torpedoes dug deep into their superstructure and within a few seconds the ship tumbled out of control.

"The enemy has been disabled," D'Karr said dryly. "We can easily finish them now."

"We are not Klingons. We don't destroy defenseless ships," Leva said.

"They are the enemy," D'Karr answered, as if not comprehending what the other man had said.

Even though Edison found himself in agreement with his tactical officer, he couldn't afford to take sides. His sensors were informing him of a quickly worsening situation. "Captain, the *Agamemnon* is in trouble."

"On screen."

Donners' ship had fared relatively well over the last minutes considering that the damaged ship had been up against two pristine Jem'Hadar attack vessels. It had managed to dispose of one but in the end,

it had lost the contest and was now being mercilessly hounded by the remaining pursuer. *Agamemnon* was venting atmosphere through half a dozen hull breaches.

"Target their weapons," Owens said right away. "Fire photon torpedoes."

"Firing."

*Eagle* unleashed several photon projectiles. Less powerful than the quantum kind but more precise and with a more controlled damage radius they would ensure that *Agamemnon* would not take damage from any impacts.

The last remaining Jem'Hadar ship could do nothing to avoid the full brunt of the attack. Its weapons and most of its engines were destroyed instantly.

Edison had been quickly and silently relieved by Lieutenant Lance Stanmore and as he got up to clear the chair he noticed Owens' sigh of relief he had not been able to hide.

"Look."

It was Culsten's insistent cry that forced everybody to take a second glance at the viewscreen. There, the bug-shaped Jem'Hadar ship had managed to activate what was left of their engines only to plot a direct collision course with *Agamemnon*.

"Fire all weapons."

Leva didn't acknowledge the order but went straight to the controls to once again dip into *Eagle*'s arsenal.

Edison turned to the helm. "Full impulse, Lieutenant. Get us over there, now."

“Aye, sir.”

Stanmore was already shaking his head. He was an able officer, not as experienced and versatile as DeMara Deen perhaps but certainly the next best operations officer on the ship. And he could tell they were not doing enough. “At this rate, we will not be able to stop a collision.”

“Mister Leva, hail the *Agamemnon*, tell them to get out of the way,” Owens said.

“They’re not going to make it,” Edison realized as he watched the impending disaster on the viewscreen. The Jem’Hadar ship was on a suicide run and would collide with the much larger ship within seconds. A tactic that would ensure both ship’s destruction.

D’Karr stepped up to the tactical station and began to manipulate the controls.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Leva said, doing a poor job of keeping his irritation in check.

“A well-placed phaser blast might change the vessel’s trajectory.”

“A phaser beam doesn’t have nearly enough power to do that,” said Leva.

“That’s why we need to increase energy output one-hundred eighty percent,” he said without interrupting his efforts.

“That would melt the arrays.”

But D’Karr continued. Leva was about to push the man away but a stern look from Edison stopped him in his tracks. The first officer wasn’t sure what the Klingon had in mind but he knew that it might be the only chance *Agamemnon* had.

Not a moment later, a massive energy beam shot across space, easily four times the girth of a regular phaser burst. The ship shuddered as it released more power than it had ever been designed to.

As Edison watched the energy lance on the viewscreen, he realized that it had not been released by any of *Eagle*'s phaser banks. The Klingon had used the ship's navigational deflector instead, surely crippling it in the process.

The beam found its target and pushed the Jem'Hadar vessel off course. The already heavily damaged vessel quickly broke apart under the immensely powerful energy discharge. Even as the main body was pushed toward empty space, numerous explosions caused parts of the hull to break loose. One of the larger pieces – the starboard warp nacelle – continued to spin toward *Agamemnon*. Before anybody could even think of another course of action, the nacelle impacted with the Starfleet vessel's hull.

Owens watched helplessly as the front of the debris fragment crashed into the upper part of *Agamemnon*'s saucer section. He knew all too well which parts of the ship would take the brunt of the damage.

"I'm reading hull breaches on deck four through one," Stanmore said.

"The bridge," Edison said quietly and looked at the captain.

"Drop shields, bring us into transporter range."

Edison turned back to the screen. Fortunately, the initial impact had caused the nacelle's momentum to change enough so that it now drifted away from the ship. "Bridge to sickbay, prepare emergency rescue teams to be beamed onto *Agamemnon*. Prepare for mass casualties."

Owens didn't turn away from the sight of destruction. "Commander Leva," he nearly croaked. "Hail the *Agamemnon*."

For a few seconds utter silence reigned on the bridge.

"No response."

It wasn't difficult to spot the pain in Owens' eyes as he let himself fall into the captain's chair.

Silence again.

"Sir, the *Agamemnon* is replying."

Edison's head whipped toward the screen.

It was filled with static and it was difficult to make out much of anything. The signal appeared to originate on the bridge. It looked desolated.

Owens tensed up noticeably.

As the image cleared a man's face came into view. It was blue. Edison recognized the man as a Bolian. It was his counterpart on *Agamemnon*. Commander Arden Texx.

"What is your status, Commander?" Owens said, clearly fearing an answer. "Do you need assistance?"

There seemed to be a short delay in the communications link probably due to damaged receivers on the other vessel.

"We've sustained some moderate structural damage over here but nothing that we can't take care of," he said with an almost irritatingly friendly disposition. But then took on a more serious demeanor. "We've also had some casualties."

It was only then that he noticed that Texx was not actually standing on the main bridge at all. He stood on the auxiliary bridge, nestled securely in the bowls of the ship.

"We managed to evacuate the outer areas in time or we would have had much grimmer news to contend with."

One of the doors to the battle bridge opened and Amaya Donners stepped into the room. She looked somewhat ruffled and her uniform was dirty but her stride was casual as if taking a walk through the park.

"Appreciate the quick thinking over there. We're in your debt," she said with a smile.

Edison watched his captain carefully. He could see that it took him a moment to realize that his worst fears had not come to pass. He took in a deep breath and visibly relaxed and only then answered Donners' smile in kind. "We do what we can to keep you in one piece."

Donners nodded. "Of course you do. You just hope that you don't get into trouble anytime soon. I'm not so sure if we are as vigilant over here."

"Sir," Edison began. "Do you need any assistance? We have medical teams standing by."

"I think we have things under control for now, thanks Gene."

He nodded.

"We'll be here if you need us," Owens said. "Ever so vigilant."

Donners laughed. "*Agamemnon* out."

The bridge disappeared from the screen to be replaced by the heavily scarred exterior of the *Akira*-class starship. Several crew members in EVA suits and small work bees were already swarming around the damaged sections.

The first officer turned to face the captain. "That was close."

Owens nodded. "Too close for comfort," he admitted and turned to Stanmore. "Lieutenant, make long-range sensors your top priority and then initiate a comprehensive scan of this sector. We cannot afford another Jem'Hadar encounter today."

"Right away, sir," the young officer replied and went to work.

Edison in the meanwhile watched attentively as three medics who had entered the bridge moments before were tending to the body of Ensign Rei. He knew that some Trill carried inside them a worm-like creature that would take all of its host's memories to a new body after it died. Rei had been young and had never been joined with a symbiont. Like humans and most other races her life and her memories had ended right there and then. When he turned away from the sad scene he cursed himself for not having done more to prevent her death, even if he wasn't sure what else he could have done..

"Lieutenant D'Karr your actions were unconventional," Owens said, forcing Edison's focus back to those still alive.

The warrior stood tall and proud at the tactical station, his face a stern visage as usual. He nodded slightly at the captain's comments. "On a Klingon ship I'm used to -"

The first officer interrupted him. "In case you hadn't noticed yet," he said sternly, "this isn't a Klingon ship."

D'Karr shot him an icy look and Edison was convinced he could recognize something akin to blood lust in his eyes.

Edison looked at the captain and noticed his smile. Edison himself could not keep one off his own face.

D'Karr seemed irritated.

"How do you think the Klingon Defense Force would react if I petitioned them for a permanent transfer?" he asked D'Karr.

"I assume they would be surprised."

"To say the least," Owens said. "You showed some excellent awareness and quick thinking, Lieutenant. I'm very pleased."

D'Karr simply nodded. He was most likely not used to receiving such praise. But pride seemed to radiate from every bone in his body.

"Sir, this last *unconventional* tactic has seriously damaged our navigational deflector," Leva said, sounding anything but impressed.

Edison took a step toward tactical. "It saved a great many lives, Commander."

"Permission to leave the bridge for a full damage assessment," he said as if he hadn't heard a word Edison had said.

His demand continued to hang in the air for a few moments. All eyes on the bridge now staring at the tactical officer.

"Permission granted," Owens said after a moment.

Leva turned on his heels and headed straight for the nearest turbo-lift.

"What's eating him?" Culsten said quietly.

Stanmore, next to him, shrugged his shoulders. "Job security?"

Owens' eyes were still fixed on the closed doors when he spoke. "Mister D'Karr, perhaps you can be as helpful with repairs."

"Certainly," came the quick reply, and without another thought he turned away to tackle his next ask.

"Stand down from red alert," said Owens and turned to Edison. "Gene, I want a full damage report and repair estimates within the hour."

He nodded.

"I'll be in my ready room," he said and then quickly crossed into his private office adjacent to the bridge.

Edison took a deep breath and looked around the battle-torn bridge. The smell of burned material, desperation, and death lingered heavy in the air. Although victorious in the end, this had been a bad encounter from the moment it had begun. It was merely one of many in the last few days. He wondered how many more they would be able to endure.

## II – ORDERS

DeMara Deen did not spend much of her time by herself.

Tenarians were by nature a social people and took great comfort in being surrounded by friends or family. Even though she had left her home world behind and had not been able to socialize with members of her race in a long time, Deen had always sought out company. And if she didn't, company usually found her. She had more friends on *Eagle* than she could count, no matter where she was, she had always been popular and she had always enjoyed being welcomed.

And yet she sat alone at a table in the lower part of The Nest, *Eagle*'s most spacious and most frequented crew lounge. Her usually perfectly smooth copper-hued forehead was adorned with a small white plaster. The fingers of her right hand carefully touched the surrounding area to alleviate some itching but then quickly darted off when she got too close and a stinging pain spread across her head.

Her left hand was entirely useless. All of her lower arm had been placed into a metallic cast and she was unable to move it more than a few centimeters. It was a very irritating sensation but a measure on which the nurse treating her had insisted.

“What’s your poison?”

She looked up with surprise. She had not noticed the man who had stepped up to her table. She immediately recognized him as Bensu, the civilian bartender who had only recently joined the crew. He had coal-colored skin that stood in stark contrast to half a dozen bony white ridges that ran the length of his hairless head. His facial features resembled those of Southeast Asians from Earth and while he was definitely not human, Deen could not figure out where exactly he hailed from. For that matter,

she wasn't aware of anybody on board who seemed to know much about the enigmatic bartender's origins.

"I beg your pardon?"

He smiled. "It's an old saying, I've been told. It refers to your beverage."

She looked down at her empty table. "I don't have a beverage."

The bartender nodded. "Exactly. So what will it be?"

She looked into his bright yellow eyes and considered the question for a moment. "Actually, I'm not that thirsty."

"Yes, I figured something like that," he said and sat in the chair opposite from her. "I hope you don't mind if I sit with you then. There isn't much to do at the moment and I wouldn't fulfill my role adequately if I didn't tend to my customers. The few that I have."

She hadn't even noticed that the lower part of the Nest – the one that housed the bar and offered crewmembers a relaxing ambiance across several comfortable seats and couches, as well as a few chairs and tables – was rather empty. "Where is everybody?"

"My guess? Tending to repairs and such."

She nodded slowly.

"I take it your injury is what keeps you from doing the same."

Her free hand touched her metal cast. She had never worn one before. Instant bone knitters and dermal regenerators had rendered them mostly obsolete but unfortunately for her, the medical staff had been too busy treating other more critical patients to attend to her less serious injuries. Instead, she had been given a quick first aid treatment and instructions to return to sickbay later in the day.

"Doctor's orders," she said.

"What happened?"

"An EPS conduit in the corridor I was walking in ruptured and ripped me right off my feet. I landed badly," she said emphasizing the cast as much as she could. "It was shortly after the attack started. I never even made it onto the bridge," she added in a guilt-ridden tone. She had heard of Ensign Rei's death and she couldn't help but feel responsible. After all the young Trill had occupied her station when she had been killed. It had never been her place to lose her life like that.

"I see."

Something in his tone made Deen look him straight into his eyes. She noticed something there she had not seen before. It was a tiny gleam that seemed to hint at something much deeper. Possibly pain or wisdom or something else entirely. But she knew then and there that there had to be much more to Bensu the bartender than what met the eye.

"Listen to me," he said in a tone of voice that made her sit up and listen to every word that came over his lips. "I know you feel guilty about what happened to Lutira on the bridge but it is important that you understand that it was never your fault. What happened was not something that was at any point in your sphere of influence. In these dark times, things can and will happen that shall test our resolve. Think about it. Imagine what could have happened to you if only you had stood a little closer to that conduit when it blew up. You can feel guilty about her death no more than any other that has occurred during this conflict. And before all this is over many more will have died, including people very close to you. It is inevitable. In the end, the only difference you will be able to make is how you decide to face it."

Deen just stared at Bensu as if she had seen him for the first time. And in fact, she had never known this side of him. She knew he was right. Every single word seemed to carry an unmistakable truth with it.

“Dee.”

She had been too focused on Bensu to hear her name being called.

The bartender however noticed and was the first to break their eye contact. “I know you’re thirsty. I’ll bring you that drink now,” he said.

She nodded slowly, wondering how he’d been able to tell.

He stood and headed for the bar at the other end of the room.

“Dee,” said Nora Laas again as she and So’Dan Leva stepped to her table.

She slowly looked up at her friends who took two of the three remaining chairs around her.

“Are you all right?” Nora said with concern in her voice.

“Huh?”

She gestured toward the cast.

Nora was almost ten years her senior and she had adopted a somewhat mother-like relationship toward her. Deen already had a mother so she preferred thinking of the Bajoran as a big sister, always trying to look out for her. She didn’t mind. She was impressed by her toughness. A characteristic that she felt she lacked and sometimes envied. Especially since the war had broken out.

“I’m fine.”

Nora nodded but with apparent skepticism.

"Your drink, Lieutenant."

Once again Deen had not noticed Bensu approaching and neither had anybody else. They whipped their heads around in surprise as the host placed a glass filled with an orange-colored beverage on the table in front of her.

She looked at him and then at the glass.

"Efrosian berry juice," he said with a smile.

"How did you know?"

"It's your regular choice, is it not?" he said quickly and then tended to the other officers at the table. "Can I bring you something?"

"Romulan Ale," Leva said.

Nora shot him a surprised look. "That's certainly not your regular choice. It's not like you to drink an alcoholic beverage while on duty."

"It's synethol," he said.

That had clearly not answered her question but he did not seem inclined to discuss it further.

"Coming right up. Lieutenant?"

She just politely declined and the bartender quickly departed again.

As soon as he was out of earshot Deen leaned in closer to her companions. "Do you think Bensu may be a telepath?"

Leva shrugged. "I don't even know what race he is."

Nora turned slightly to make sure the Nest's jovial host was still preoccupied with their order. "You don't find that suspicious? We don't

know anything about him and he just shows up here a few weeks before the war starts."

Deen smiled for the first time since she had come to the Nest. She couldn't help herself; Nora's suspicious nature amused her. "You think he might be a Dominion spy? A changeling perhaps?" she said with mock sincerity.

Nora countered with actual sincerity. "In these times you can't be too careful."

Leva seemed unperturbed by her fears as well. "I know that Xylion knew him before he came on *Eagle*. If he vouched for him that's good enough for me," he said and then looked right into her hazel eyes. "Unless Xylion's a shapeshifter as well."

Deen couldn't hold back a chuckle to which Nora simply rolled her eyes. She quickly tensed up again when she spotted Bensu return with Leva's drink.

"You seem to be having a good time," he said and placed the ale in front of the half-Romulan officer.

"Just some casual banter," Deen said, somewhat guilty about the lie.

Bensu seemed to be able to look right through her. "Of course."

She slightly but fortunately Bensu quickly moved on to a different subject. "I just met a lonely officer who could use some company. Would you mind if I seated him at your table?"

"A lonely officer on this ship? We can't have that," Deen said, "can we?" she added to her friends.

Leva nodded and after a second so did Nora.

"Great," Bensu said and turned away. "Mister D'Karr, why don't you come over here?"

Leva looked up at the mention of the name as though somebody had just slapped him in the face. He had obviously developed second thoughts regarding his offer but decided to keep them to himself for now.

A few moments later the burly Klingon exchange officer had made it over to the table and took the last remaining seat. Bensu promptly disappeared again to tend to other guests, as the new patrons began to fill into the Nest.

D'Karr had been on *Eagle* for less than two weeks and Deen had not had the chance to talk to him much outside of duty hours, and she was certain this was true for the others as well. Although it did seem like the imposing Klingon preferred to keep to himself.

"I'm curious, Lieutenant," Nora said. "How do you rate *Eagle* so far? Compared to what you're used to."

D'Karr regarded her for a moment as if she had asked an utterly absurd question. "It is a good ship."

Deen snickered which caused the Klingon to shoot her an icy stare. Or at least she thought it was icy. For a Klingon, it might have been friendly. In any case, it caused her to swallow and suppress any other noises.

"You are the Tenarian," he said.

She nodded. "Yeah, but most people just call me Dee. And I'm sure you've met Nora Laas."

"Laas is fine while we're not on duty," she said with a smile. She did not seem intimidated by the Klingon at all.

“And So’Dan Leva.”

Deen was not surprised that Leva remained quiet. It was no secret that Klingons and Romulans did not get along well. But he hardly even made eye contact with the exchange officer and that she did find odd. As far as she knew, he had never really behaved like a typical Romulan and he had on many occasions pointed out that he had little in common with them.

D’Karr didn’t seem bothered by the lack of acknowledgment and quickly focused on Nora. “You are Bajoran. A proud people, raised as warriors.”

“Not by choice, I assure you.”

D'Karr nodded. "I understand. But your people did what was necessary and you did it well."

Nora nodded but didn't say anything on the subject. Deen guessed that she didn't care to be reminded of her youth in the Bajoran resistance, a time mostly spent fighting and killing. She couldn't even imagine what this must have been like for the young Nora Laas.

"You know how to face an enemy better than most of us. With warriors as determined as you we will surely achieve a glorious victory over the Dominion and their Cardassian lackeys," he said, his voice rising significantly, causing a few looks from neighboring tables. D'Karr didn't pay it any attention. He was clearly not overly familiar with the concept of the inside voice.

Nora couldn't quite keep a smile off her face.

Leva finished his ale with one large gulp and then got up from his chair. "If you'll excuse me," he said, his voice almost the exact opposite of the boisterous-sounding Klingon.

Both Nora and Deen aimed surprised glances in his direction but he never turned back to take any notice.

D'Karr continued as if nothing had happened. "Your captain seems to be a capable officer for a human," he said. "Has he claimed many victories worth of song and glory?"

Nora needed a second to focus on his question. "Well, we're still here," she said in a joking manner but quickly found that D'Karr didn't seem to prescribe to her sense of humor. "He has led us successfully through several tough scraps. I could see a few songs that could be made of our adventures. Maybe not enough to fill a whole concert, but there'll be a couple of gems there," she said. Her second attempt at humor seemed to break the ice as D'Karr allowed himself something akin to a smirk.

"If you really want to know about the captain you should talk to Dee. They've known each other for a long time."

D'Karr turned and looked at the other woman expectantly.

However, Deen was lost in her thoughts, not at all paying attention to the conversation taking place at the table.

"Dee?" Nora said.

She looked at the Bajoran with a puzzled expression on her face.

"We were talking about the captain. I was telling D'Karr that you two have a long history together."

"History?" she said.

"Yes."

Deen stood. "I'm sorry but I have to go," she said too quickly. She looked at the Klingon who seemed to be doing well in hiding his surprise. "It was nice speaking to you," she added and then departed hastily.

D'Karr turned back to Nora. "Does this crew always behave this oddly?"

She watched Deen leave. "I don't know what's going on today."

"I have noticed that non-Klingons have a more difficult time handling the excitement and challenge that comes with battle. Your crew may not have yet adjusted to the reality of combat."

Nora slowly turned back to the table. "Perhaps," she said and then looked back at D'Karr, trying to force her worries off her mind. "Why don't you tell me more about how Klingons handle the excitement of combat? Color me intrigued."

D'Karr it turned out liked the sound of his voice and even more so found great delight in recounting his many battle experiences. Nora listened attentively to everything he had to say. But she couldn't manage to ignore the voice in the back of her head that told her that something more was troubling her friends than the inevitable stress and frustration of fighting a stronger and seemingly more resourceful enemy.

\* \* \*

"The upper phaser array overloaded; shield generators five, six, and eight have failed; we have hull breaches on deck six, seven, nine, and fifteen. We've also lost life support on deck seven and artificial gravity on deck nine. We do not have warp drive due to a ruptured EPS conduit on deck nine. The main deflector dish is currently non-operational."

Owens sighed. He sat quietly in his chair in the ready room, listening to his first officer's damage report. "It would have been quicker and easier if you had listed the systems that are actually still working. What is our estimated repair time?"

"The shields and phasers should be back to full operation within two hours," Edison said. They had learned the hard way that in these times tactical and defensive systems had to take priority. "Two and a half hours for the deflector and about five hours for warp drive."

Owens frowned. "Five hours?"

"That was Hopkins' preliminary estimate," he said with a smirk. "But I intend to have a word with her about it."

He nodded. Chief engineer Louise Hopkins worked best under pressure; he knew that. She seemed young and delicate for the position but

if she was pushed, she could truly perform miracles. And *Eagle* needed one right now. He was not comfortable with the idea of sitting dead in the water for five hours, an easy target for any enemy patrol.

Edison's face darkened. "We've also lost six crewmembers."

It was the highest number of casualties *Eagle* had suffered in a single engagement since this war had started. And Owens feared that it was but a sign of things yet to come. *Eagle* had already lost more than thirty percent of its regular crew due to reassessments. Sure, modern starships like *Eagle* were heavily automated, and if push came to shove, they could operate the ship with a skeleton crew. But not well, certainly not well enough for a battle with the Dominion. Owens was certain that every additional loss would seriously endanger the efficiency of ship operations in combat.

The image of young Lutira Rei's lifeless body sprawled out on the bridge, felt like it had been seared into his mind. He couldn't help but fear who'd be next. Death had become disturbingly commonplace and it struck with little warning and no prejudice.

The nature of war required him to concentrate on the living. There would be plenty of time to mourn those who hadn't made it when this war had concluded. Either that or there be no one left to do any mourning at all.

He glanced up at his standing first officer. He could see in his eyes that he had not been able to forget the young Trill's death easily either. He could think of no consoling words to offer him.

"Gene, how do you judge ship morale at present?"

"Not good," he said. "This last battle has most likely convinced the most optimistic soul on board that we're in this for the long haul. By now nearly everybody on this ship has lost a friend or somebody they knew. If not here then on a different ship. If I could I would suggest immediate

shore leave rotations and extensive counseling sessions before the crew settles into a state of permanent depression.”

Owens knew that neither option was currently a possibility. “Can you think of an alternative?”

He shook his head slightly. “Not right now but I’ll give it some thought.”

“We’re going to get through this, Gene. I know that it feels like we’re looking down into the abyss and that it’s looking straight back at us. But I refuse to believe that it is bottomless. There’s a spark of hope down there somewhere and we’re going to grab it and squeeze it for all it’s worth.”

“I’ve lost a lot of things in my life. Hope’s never been one of them,” he said with one of his trademark beaming smiles.

Owens mirrored it.

*“Bridge to Captain Owens.”* It was Commander Xylion, the Vulcan science officer’s voice that cut through their conversation.

“Go ahead, Commander.”

“Sir, we’re receiving an incoming message from Starfleet Command. It is marked high priority.”

“Perhaps that hope we’re looking for,” said Edison.

“Put it through to my ready room please.”

“Understood. Xylion out.”

Edison turned to the exit. “I’ll report back once I’ve got an update on the repair times.”

Owens nodded and once Edison had left turned to his desk monitor. He pressed a single button to accept the incoming call. The screen switched on and displayed the white and blue Federation seal only to be quickly replaced by the face of a Denobulan admiral.

"Michael, it is good to see you again," the cheery admiral said as soon as he had appeared.

The wide smile on the admiral's face was infectious and Owens couldn't help but reply in kind. Admiral Throl was among the most heartening individuals he had ever met. His seemingly constant joyful disposition was a trait of his people, of course, but sometimes Owens had to remind himself that this cheerful man was in fact an admiral and his immediate superior. He was surprised to find that even the war had not managed to dampen Throl's spirits.

"It's good to see you, too, Admiral. Last I heard you were in a tight spot in the Argus sector."

Throl nodded but kept his smile. "That was a close call but," he said and his smile impossibly grew even larger, "it takes more than a Cardassian fleet to get the better of me."

Owens suppressed a chuckle. While speaking with Throl it was easy to almost forget that the Federation was struggling for its very survival. Almost.

"I'm glad to hear that. I hope you're bearing good news today because heaven knows we could really use some around here."

"Captain," Throl said, his smile deflating slightly. "You and *Eagle* have performed exceptionally over the last few days and so has the *Agamemnon*. However, things are not well." Throl shook his head. "Not well at all."

Owens sighed.

The Denobulan caught himself, however, and almost jumped out of his seat when he spoke again. "But, Captain, I will not be held responsible for souring your mood any more than it already has due to the circumstances we all find ourselves in," he said so quickly that it took Owens a second to follow. "There is plenty of work to be done and plenty of chances to be had to influence all our fates."

"Why do I have the feeling that I'm not going to like what you're about to say next?"

Throl's smile widened to its previous extent. "Because you, Captain, are one of those people who always assume the worst. I personally think you will be quite fond of your new orders."

Owens shifted in his seat. He hadn't expected new orders. *Eagle* and *Agamemnon* had been reasonably successful in their border sweep mission and considering how bad the news from the frontlines had been, he had figured that Starfleet wanted to continue to push their few successes.

"I honestly believe that your new mission will be exactly what you and your crew need, Michael. However, there is a little bit of a – what do you humans call it?" He stopped momentarily, trying to recall the right word. "Ah yes. A catch."

"Isn't there always?"

\* \* \*

Eugene Edison had lost crewmembers under his command before. He had seen two wars, numerous border conflicts, and a full-out invasion attempt on Earth, and in all those conflicts many of his fellow crewmembers had given their lives.

And yet for some reason, the death of Rei had shaken him up more than any other fatality he could recall. It had been more intimate, more personal than anything else he had experienced before and he couldn't quite explain why. He felt as though he had failed the young officer even though as much as he wanted to think otherwise, there had been nothing he could have done differently.

Her death had affected him on a deeply personal level. His relationship with the young ensign had never been much more than the professional courtesy he afforded to all his junior officers and yet her death had made him realize more than ever before that survival had become a precious commodity. Being a Starfleet officer had always been a dangerous occupation and he had long accepted the uncertain hazards that came with the job. But life had never felt so fleeting and precious before and he had never been more aware of that fact than he was now.

"Can I help you, Commander?"

Edison looked up. He had walked straight into *Eagle's* main engineering compartment but had been so preoccupied with his thoughts that he had paid little attention to his surroundings.

Only now did he notice the chaos that seemed to reign here. At least three dozen technicians and engineers were swarming around the large multi-level room, tending to repairs. And not only had he stepped right into their midst, but he was also quite noticeably in their way, forcing many of them to awkwardly step around him.

Nobody had been bold enough to confront the first officer except for Fernuc, the Bolian assistant chief engineer. The completely bald, blue-skinned man eyed Edison carefully, patiently waiting for him to reply.

"I'm looking for Lieutenant Hopkins."

Fernuc nodded slowly. "She's working on the main EPS manifold," he said and pointed to the back of engineering. "Good luck getting her attention," he added with a smile.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Edison said and headed in the direction he had indicated. He walked past the monolithic blue warp core and entered a less busy part of the engine room. Only a handful of engineers occupied this much more limited space. He almost didn't notice the young engineer until he spotted a pair of legs sticking out from an open conduit. He slowly approached the wall and curiously looked down at the legs. They were not moving. He cleared his throat, trying to get her attention but the legs remained firmly in place.

"Lieutenant."

Two crewmembers who stood nearby turned but the person inside the hatch refused to move.

He loudly tapped against the bulkhead.

"What the -" her question was abruptly cut off by a loud banging noise and a yelp of pain.

Edison dropped to a squat. "Lieutenant, are you all right?"

"How many times?" she said as she slowly made her way out of the hatch. "How many times have I told you guys not to—" she interrupted herself when she was greeted by Edison's wide smile as she emerged from the hatch. "Oh, it's you."

"It's me," he said and held out his hand to help her back on her feet. "I'm sorry if I startled you but you seemed quite focused on whatever it was you were doing in there."

Hopkins pushed her shoulder-long sandy blonde hair out of her face. "It's that damned EPS manifold. Ever since that conduit blew out the

whole grid is out of sync and I can't figure out why," she spotted her second-in-command and quickly turned to him. "Fernuc, have you checked the lateral phase compensators on deck twenty-one?"

The Bolian nodded. "Twice. All within tolerance."

Hopkins sighed. She rubbed her forehead with a grimace of pain as she walked to a different console.

Edison followed her. "Maybe you should let Wenera have a look at that."

"Don't get me wrong, Commander, I think she's a very capable doctor," she said and began to work a console. "But I doubt she'd have a clue about a variance disturbance in the main power distribution system."

"I meant your head."

"Oh," she said, blushing slightly. She stopped working and looked at the first officer. "I'm fine. I'll just have a nasty bruise in the morning."

He nodded.

"Fernuc, are you sure the plasma injectors are not running too hot?"

"They are point six degrees below the maximum recommended operating temperature," the Bolian answered who had by now moved to a console at the other end of the room.

Hopkins shook her head and moved to another station. "So that's not it either then. Kate, reset the power modulation for all EPS conduits perhaps that will show us why the manifolds won't output the right phase variance."

Katherine Smith, *Eagle*'s warp drive chief nodded quickly and went to work.

"What's the problem?" Edison said even though he was pretty sure what the answer was.

Hopkins didn't look up from her station. "My wrench."

That had not been what he had expected and he shot her a perplexed look. But the chief engineer didn't appear interested in elaborating any further and instead simply moved on to the next computer console.

"Your wrench?"

Fernuc stepped next to the first officer. "She lost her wrench," he said before he began to work on the station the chief engineer had just vacated.

"I'm not sure I follow."

Smith looked up from her console. "It was her lucky wrench, you see," she said but was forced to focus back on the information on the screen in front of her. "Power modulation reset on all EPS manifolds."

"When you say *wrench* –"

"No change to the phase variance," Fernuc said and looked up. "Yes, an old-fashioned, usually metallic tool used to tighten or loosen bolts."

"*Eagle*'s EPS manifolds have bolts?" Edison said still not entirely sure what the engineers were talking about.

"No," said Smith. "Phase variance at two point five terahertz."

"Main manifold readings still unchanged," Fernuc said and then turned to Edison. "Without her wrench, things don't work right."

He thought he was beginning to. "It's a superstitious thing."

Hopkins turned her head to look straight at him. "No, it's a fact. Without the darn thing, this ship simply won't work right."

"Well, where did you see it last?"

"Deck fifteen, section eight," Smith answered in her stead.

"Oh," he said, realizing that a hull breach during the battle with the Jem'Hadar had caused that entire section to be exposed to the vacuum of space. The emergency force fields had not activated in time causing explosive decompression throughout the entire section. Luckily no crewmembers had been lost but he was certain that everything else that had not been fastened securely had been blown into space.

"You can't just replicate a new one?" he said and quickly regretted doing so.

Every technician in earshot immediately stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him with foreboding looks on their faces.

"My great-grandfather made that wrench with his own two hands," the chief engineer said slowly as if she had said the exact same sentence hundreds of times before.

"It's a priceless family heirloom," Fernuc and Smith added in unison. "It cannot be replicated."

Hopkins shot them both annoyed glares that prompted them to quickly return their full attention to their respective stations. "Commander, if I may ask, what brings you down here?" she said as she stepped next to him again, now willing to move the conversation away from a matter he clearly wasn't able to fully appreciate.

Edison held up a padd that he had brought with him. "I've looked at your repair estimates and I thought—"

"Let me guess. You didn't like how much time repairs are taking and you thought coming down here and putting pressure on me would get things done quicker?"

"Something like that."

"Let me tell you something, Commander. Contrary to what you and the captain may think, I'm not a miracle worker. In fact, despite rumors to the contrary, there's no such thing. I don't just wave a magic wand—"

"Or wrench," Edison said, eliciting a chuckle from the Bolian assistant chief engineer.

"And everything's hunky dory, ready to go," she continued, ignoring the interruption.

Edison's smile didn't waver. Not for the first time he was astonished to find how assertive Louise Hopkins could be when she was in her element. She seemed to be an entirely different person when she was in these surroundings. Here, in main engineering, she was a confident engineer, master, and unchallenged ruler of her domain but outside she tended to be far more introspective and unsure of herself.

"I do understand that, I really do. It's just that..." he stopped himself as he looked at his padd.

Hopkins' sparkly blue eyes watched him suspiciously.

"It seems that R'chenverty will have his warp drive back online in four hours and that will mean that the *Agamemnon* will have to wait for us until we can—"

"There is no way that they'll have warp drive back in four hours," Hopkins said. "Their entire starboard nacelle is depolarized."

Edison shrugged. "I guess R'chenverty is just one heck of an engineer."

Hopkins snorted at that comment as she turned to a nearby console. "If we reset the anti-matter injectors and alter the deuterium flow levels by

three to four percent, we might be able to shorten the repair time," she said to nobody in particular. She continued to work at the console and then quickly turned to Fernuc. "Get on that, will you?"

The Bolian nodded and promptly headed out of the room.

Hopkins turned back to the first officer. "That would put us at about three hours of work," she said proudly. "I want to see R'chenverty top that."

Edison laughed. "I'm sure he'll be as impressed as I am." What he hadn't told *Eagle*'s chief engineer was the fact that the repair estimates from *Agamemnon* were actually closer to five hours than to four. It hadn't been so much of a lie as a slight exaggeration of the truth. He knew that Hopkins thrived under pressure and that she liked to believe that she was one of the best engineers in the fleet. Edison was certain that she was. "You know my uncle is an avid mechanic and he loves to use old-fashioned tools. He's got quite a fascinating collection of antiques."

Hopkins' face lit up.

"I'll have to have a word with him. I think I can talk him into giving up one of his wrenches."

She nodded slowly. "If the ship hasn't fallen apart by then," she said with a smile, her previous tension seemingly evaporated. Once she realized that Smith had left as well, she took a step closer to him. "So, how's Laas?" she said, trying her best to sound casual.

Edison threw her a surprised look, causing her to blush slightly.

"I just thought you two, you know?" she almost stumbled over her words. It was clear that she was after some gossip that her close friend Nora Laas apparently had been unwilling to share with her.

"What precisely is it you'd like to know?" he said with a smile.

It became quickly obvious that she had not fully planned this out in her head and now seemed uncertain where to take this next. "Never mind all that. Actually, I'm pretty busy down here, in case you weren't able to tell," she said and turned back to the computer station.

Edison nodded, not able to suppress his amusement. "Of course. I'll leave you to it then," he said and headed for the exit.

\* \* \*

The Bajoran chief of security stood waiting in front of the closed doors of the turbo-lift on deck ten. She had spent the last hour in the company of D'Karr in the Nest and had found the Klingon surprisingly pleasant. She had never known any Klingons personally and could not deny that her views on the warrior race had been colored by preconceptions and stereotypes. Some of which had turned out to be true.

He was undeniably a warrior and proud of his accomplishments in battle and seemed to cherish those memories. Only in combat, he had pointed out, could the true character of a person be judged. And combat was inevitable.

Nora had wanted to disagree with that observation. Battle was an ugly necessity, she knew that. No matter how peaceful or tolerant the Federation was, there would always be others who would be at odds with them. The Federation would always have to fight for its right to exist and there would always be people like her who stood ready to defend it.

She was also well aware that while combat and violence were a dreadful business, they were effective means. Without violence, the Cardassians would not have left Bajor and without violence, the Dominion would not

stop their attempts of conquest. But she wanted to believe that people were most productive, creative, and satisfied during times of peace. She had seen too much death and war in the mere thirty-two years she had been alive that she was about ready to leave all of it behind her. It was a pleasant fantasy at best.

The doors opened and she stepped into the lift car, occupied by two other crewmembers; Vulcan tactical officer Trinik and first officer Gene Edison.

“Commander. Lieutenant,” she quickly and formally greeted the two officers who both responded with a short nod. Nora couldn’t help but smile as she positioned herself right next to Edison. Trinik remained close to the doors, his back turned to them both.

Nora stole a quick glance at Edison and noticed that he was smiling as well. The tall Englishman with his plentiful mob of dirty blonde hair and bright hazel-colored eyes was one of the reasons for her newly found philosophy on life. She wasn’t quite so sure what their relationship was exactly, after all, she did not possess a great deal of experience in the matter, but it was undeniable that she had strong feelings for him and vice versa.

She had discovered those almost a year earlier when he had very nearly died in her arms on the surface of a frozen planet. In fact, he had died then. Only to be resuscitated just in time to avoid brain damage he had remained in critical condition thereafter making her fear the worst. Seeing him in that state had been among the most excruciating things she had ever experienced. For the first time in her life, she had been utterly helpless while at the same time knowing exactly what she wanted. She had wanted him and she still did.

And yet things had moved painfully slow after his recovery. It had taken her some time to come to grips with how to deal with those new

feelings and even longer how to speak to him about them. For a while, she had been so scared that he did not feel the same way that she had started to avoid him as much as possible. And when it had finally looked as if maybe there could be some sort of future to their relationship, war had broken out and suddenly all and everybody's priorities had changed.

"On the way to the briefing?" Edison said, offering her a side glance.

She nodded. "Any idea what this is about?"

"The captain received a message from Command. I wouldn't be surprised if we're getting new orders."

The lift came to a stop and the doors opened to allow Lieutenant Trinik to exit. As soon as the doors closed, the turbo-lift set in motion again.

Edison turned to her. "Nora, there is something I wanted to—"

He did not get the chance to finish his sentence.

She forcefully pushed him against the bulkhead and within a heartbeat, Nora was pressed against him, her lips coming down hard against his. Her passion was at the boiling point. They had both decided to keep their relationship on a low profile while the war raged on. They hardly ever got a chance to be alone as they avoided being seen together. It was an arrangement that they had decided was best for the crew which had to be able to rely on having strong, emotionally unattached leaders to look up to in these dark and uncertain times. But it was also an agreement that drove Nora crazy.

Edison managed to free himself for a second. "Computer, halt lift."

The turbo-lift obliged immediately.

Nora allowed him just enough time to speak the command before she reached out for his face and continued to kiss him greedily. His resistance quickly melted as he was caught up in the moment.

"Laas, I'm trying to talk to you," he managed to say in between the steamy showcase of affection.

"Talk later," she said and wrapped herself closer to the man she had so completely fallen for.

But Edison was determined and finally managed to push her away.

Nora sighed heavily and took a few steps back, an angry expression on her face. "What?"

"I'm just not sure if what we are doing is right," he said slowly, his eyes drifting away from her.

"You don't mean that," she shot back. "We already decided not to see each other in public. Now you want us to just put everything on hold?"

"Laas, if we keep this up sooner or later somebody will find out."

"So what? Let them find out, I don't care."

"We both agreed—"

"No, you agreed," she said, anger now rising in her tone.

Edison let out a small sigh. "Crew morale is already near rock bottom. People are dying, and I just don't think it's appropriate for the people to see their security chief and first officer having a great time."

"You are worried about crew morale?" she said with disbelief. "You ever considered that this crew could use some sort of positive news? To remind them what it is we're fighting for?"

He nodded. "I do. But I was thinking of something less personal. The captain has asked me to think of something to boost crew morale. I don't think he was thinking of a love affair between his senior officers."

Nora turned his back to him. "Why don't you put on a piano performance, I'm sure everybody would love that," she said with an evil grin she hid from him. After spending time with Edison she found out that he was a gifted player but that he had kept his talent a secret on *Eagle*. He appeared somewhat embarrassed about admitting to his skills. Why, she did not know.

"I don't think so," he said. "Computer, continue."

The computer acknowledged with a soft trill and the lift set back into motion toward deck two.

"Okay so you're telling me to stay away from you then, is that it?" she said, still not willing to face him.

"Laas, you know I care for you a great deal—"

"Oh is that how you feel? You care for me?"

"I just think it would be for the best for everybody if we don't see each other for a while."

The lift stopped and the doors opened.

She didn't move. Instead, she turned and looked him straight in the eye. "You should go ahead. If we arrive together, somebody could get the wrong idea, and we wouldn't want that, would we?"

He sighed, gave her a short nod, and then stepped out of the lift.

Nora remained in the empty, unmoving lift for a few seconds longer. She felt her eyes moisten. She quickly shook it off. She would not allow herself

to cry. Not a single tear. Instead, she took a deep breath and walked out of the turbo-lift.

\* \* \*

When Nora entered the observation lounge, located at the very back end of deck two, right beneath the bridge, she was relieved to find that she was not the last one to turn up. So'Dan Leva was the only senior officer missing and the captain had also not yet arrived. Although everyone was well aware that Owens preferred to join meetings a few minutes late. She was certain that his habit did not stem from eccentricity or tardiness, instead he probably just didn't like waiting on people. It was an attitude he had earned with his rank.

She also noticed Edison already sitting to the right of the empty chair at the head of the table, glancing briefly her way before turning back to a padd he was reading.

Nora tried hard to avoid letting her disappointment show as she took a chair as far away from the first officer as possible.

"Are you okay?"

She turned to look at Louise Hopkins sitting across from her.

"Fine," she said a little bit too sharply.

She did not get a chance to apologize for her abruptness as the captain entered the briefing room at just that moment. He strode to his seat and sat down. He quickly glanced across the room and acknowledged the empty seat next to his first officer which was usually where Leva sat. He

shot a look at Edison but his expression seemed to say that he did not know about the tactical officer's whereabouts either.

"As some of you are aware, We've been contacted by Admiral Throl who has given us new orders that will go into effect immediately."

"Does that mean we will not continue our border sweep with the *Agamemnon*?" said DeMara Deen, who sat two seats removed from Owens, in between Commander Xylion and Doctor Wenera.

Owens nodded. "That is correct. Instead, we will proceed to Starbase 74 where we will undergo any essential repairs before we continue to—"

The captain stopped himself when the doors to the observation lounge opened and Leva stepped in. He moved quickly to his seat and sat down. "I'm sorry I'm late," he said under his breath.

Edison shot him a sidelong glance, letting him know that he was not pleased with his tardiness.

"From Starbase 74," Owens continued undeterred, "we will proceed to the Ligos star system to support a newly established outpost."

"I am not aware of a Federation outpost in that system," Xylion said.

"As I said," Owens added with a smile. "It's new. Now, before I go on any further, I need to make clear that this is all classified information. You're not to discuss the details of this mission with anybody of the crew. This entire assignment is strictly need-to-know."

"Starfleet Intelligence?" said Edison.

The captain nodded. "They're the ones who have classified the mission details but I'm not entirely sure if this mission has been cooked up by them. The admiral admitted that he knew of no direct connections."

"Which is of course exactly what they would want us to think," said Doctor Wenera. She had a bad experience with classified missions. Over a year earlier she had uncovered that *Eagle* had been part of a secret assignment ordered by Admiral Owens, the captain's father. She still believed that her efforts to find out the true nature of that mission had led to disaster, including the death of Xylion's estranged fiancé.

Again Owens nodded as he considered the raven-haired doctor. Even though he had been away from *Eagle* for most of the duration of that particular mission he was well aware of what had transpired in his absence. He could certainly understand the doctor's misgivings about the intelligence community. "I do believe that somebody else has a significant interest in this mission. The details are simply too sketchy and the outline too ambiguous for this to be as straightforward as it sounds."

"What else do we know?" Edison said. "How exactly are we supposed to support this outpost?"

"It appears that this base," Owens glanced at a padd he had brought with him, "designated Epsilon Twelve, has not been fully equipped. We've been tasked to get them what they need."

"A cargo hauling mission?" Nora said, leaning forward in her chair. "They can't be serious. *Eagle* is a ship-of-the-line and they want to waste us to be a freighter?"

"I find myself in agreement with the Lieutenant," said Xylion however differently to the Bajoran he remained perfectly calm as he spoke.

"That's a first," Ashley Wenera said.

Xylion continued as if he had not been interrupted. "If the news concerning the state of the war effort is correct it would seem illogical for *Eagle* not to be part of the ongoing fight against the Dominion."

Deen nodded. "It doesn't seem to make much sense to me either."

"Trust me, I feel the same way," Owens said. "I raised similar concerns with Admiral Throl and he assured me that he would like nothing better than to put us onto the frontlines where we can make a real difference in the war effort."

"So Throl doesn't know what this is all about," Deen said.

"It would appear that way. Unless the sly son of a gun is a darn good liar. Sometimes you can't trust a man who smiles all the time," the captain said and added a smile of his own to make a point.

It eased the tension in the room somewhat. But Nora was still not convinced. "I don't like this one bit," she said and resigned herself to sit back in her chair.

"This is not a democracy," Gene Edison said. "Like it or not, we're soldiers in a time of war. And as such we follow the orders given to us."

She shot him an icy look most didn't seem to notice.

Owens on the other hand was pleased with his support. He didn't like the orders either. The idea of running errands in the hinterlands of the Federation while millions were fighting and dying to protect it was not what he had signed up for. He didn't like fighting and certainly not dying but if it was necessary, if that was what was required to safeguard the Federation it was something he did not have to think twice about.

"What about *Agamemnon*?" Hopkins said. "Is she going to join us?"

Owens shook his head. It was another part of the new orders he didn't like. He had many friends throughout the fleet but he counted Amaya Donners as one of the closest. When he had found out that *Eagle* and *Agamemnon* were to work together he had been glad that she was going to be close by where he could keep an eye out for her. But that would no longer be

possible. “The *Syracuse* is on her way to relieve us here. She should arrive in less than two hours. That means I want to be on our way as soon as she gets here. How are repairs coming along?”

“Shields and weapons should be online within the hour. The main deflector shortly after. I’ll be able to give you up to warp four in about two,” Hopkins said proudly, enjoying the look of surprise on the captain’s face.

Edison couldn’t help himself but smirk.

“Good work, Lieutenant,” Owens said.

“May I make a suggestion?”

“Go ahead, doctor.”

“You must have noticed that crew morale has dipped to a worrisome low over the last few days.”

Owens nodded.

“I’ve spoken to Counselor Trenira and we both agree that we need to implement measures to counter this trend. Or at least try.” Her words were greeted with general agreement in the room. “And this mission might be the perfect opportunity if we are not to directly contribute to the fighting.”

“I don’t know,” Leva said, the first words he had spoken since he had joined the briefing late. “Too much of a distraction might be counterproductive. We don’t want the crew to lose focus and become complacent.”

“I’m not talking about full-out shore leave on Risa, Commander,” she said. “Just a little bit of a break to take our minds off the war.”

“I think that’s a splendid idea,” Owens said and looked at his first officer who nodded slightly. “What do you have in mind, doctor?”

"I have an idea," Nora said suddenly and leaned into the table. "Why don't we have a musical recital?" she said with a sinister grin on her face.

Edison quickly tensed up, suddenly becoming uncomfortable with the subject.

"We have several very talented musicians on board," she continued while looking directly at Edison. "I know for a fact that Commander Edison is very good with the piano."

"Really?" said Deen, clearly not having been aware of the first officer's musical abilities.

"The lieutenant is exaggerating my skills," he said, forcing a smile onto his lips.

"Nonsense," Nora quickly countered. "Didn't you tell me once that you went to a famous music school on Earth? What was it called? Julian?"

"Juilliard," Edison said quietly.

"I think I speak for all of us if I say that I would love to hear you play, Commander," Owens said with a wide smile. The revelation of his first officer's musical aptitude as much news to him as to the rest of his officers. "Doctor, perhaps you could coordinate the event?"

"With pleasure."

"It's settled then," he said and gave his first officer a quick look.

Edison acknowledged with a hesitant nod. "We should also see if we can change crew rotations and increase downtime for each member of the crew. This would give everybody a chance to catch their breath for a few days."

"Good idea, why don't you hammer out a roster for that? If there is nothing more," Owens said and quickly checked the room for anybody wanting to add anything. "Dismissed," he added after nobody had spoken up.

The officers all around the table began to stand and then headed toward one of the two exits. Owens remained in his seat.

"Commander Leva, could you stay a moment?" Edison said once he too had left his seat.

Leva had tried to make a fast exit but Edison had called out for him just before he had reached the doors. He froze and waited for the other officers to pass him by. Nora threw him an asking glance as she walked by him but it went unanswered. Only after the room had cleared did he turn to face Edison and Owens. "Sir?"

"I was wondering if there is anything you would like to talk about," Edison said.

Leva looked at Edison for a moment. Then at the captain but he had picked up a padd and all his focus seemed to be focused on reading it. Leva took a few steps toward the table. "I do not think so."

"Are you sure?"

"During our last encounter with the Jem'Hadar, the deflector took more damage from the actions taken by Mister D'Karr than from our enemy. The repair work was extensive and I wanted to make sure they were being done right. That explains why I was late," Leva said. His voice seemed calm but to somebody who knew him, it was all too obvious that something was brooding under the surface.

"If this had been an isolated incident I would not have bothered to mention it. But you have not been acting yourself over the last week and quite frankly it is beginning to be a concern."

"There is no need to worry, Commander. Things are fine."

Edison watched Leva for a few seconds before he shook his head slightly and continued. "It should be quite clear to anybody on this ship that the contrary is true."

Without any warning Leva's fist came down hard on the dark glass surface of the table, causing a loud bang and slightly cracking the material.

Owens put down his padd and stood.

Edison had not even blinked but his face showed obvious surprise at the tactical officer's reaction.

For a moment the room was dead quiet.

Leva's eyes were downcast when he spoke again. "We've all been under a great deal of stress," he said, his tone sounding unconvincing.

"Commander, after this display of unrestrained anger I don't really see much of a choice but to order you to see Counselor -"

"I sincerely apologize for my actions, sir. I have been out of line," Leva interrupted, now making direct eye contact. "You are correct. I've been feeling some strain over the last few days and I've been having some personal issues. I know this doesn't excuse my recent behavior but I guarantee you that I can handle this."

Edison took another step toward the table that separated him from Leva. "Your actions are beginning to jeopardize ship operations and we cannot afford that. Not now."

Leva nodded. "I realize that," he said somewhat defensively. "The doctor pointed out that this new mission will give us all the opportunity to take a break and deal with the stress we've all been feeling. All I ask, sir, is that you allow me that opportunity as well. I *will* get a handle on this problem and make certain that it will no longer be an issue."

Edison seemed to consider his words for a moment. "Very well. You've always been an exemplary officer and you'll get your chance. But you better make damn sure that you keep to your word."

"Yes, sir. Thank you," he said and shot a quick look at the captain who gave him a short nod. Leva turned on his heels and headed straight out of the room.

When the doors had closed behind him Owens stepped to the spot Leva had occupied and looked at the closed door. "What has gotten into him?" he said. He had always known that Leva had a hot-tempered side in him. His Romulan side. As long as Owens had known him, he had been able to control those impulses but now he worried that his human side might be losing the struggle.

"He's been like this since D'Karr has come on board," Edison said.

Owens nodded. "Yes, I can see that they might not get along very well," he said. He too had noticed the hostility between them. Klingons and Romulans had been mortal enemies for a long time or at least that was what they claimed. Both races were extremely distrustful of each other and had seen many major conflicts and disputes in the past. Owens had been concerned about bringing a Klingon onto *Eagle* but his concern had mostly been that the Klingon would be the cause of the problems and not his tactical officer. "I don't like this kind of behavior on my ship," he said and looked at Edison. "Leva is a Starfleet officer and I expect him to behave like one."

Edison nodded. The captain had always given him a free hand in dealing with the crew. It was his responsibility to make sure they worked efficiently and so far it had never been much of an issue. "I'll keep my eye on him."

The captain looked down at the crack in the table, letting his fingers brush over it. "You don't think we should do more?"

"In my opinion, we can ill afford to lose him now. Not only is he the best tactical officer on this ship, he might very well be one of the best in the fleet. We need him at his post."

Owens nodded slowly and then looked up at his first officer, a smile quickly replacing his frown.

"Sir?"

"I'm really looking forward to the recital," Owens said. "I'm going to get a front-row seat," he added and then turned to leave the observation lounge.

Edison let out a small sigh. "Fantastic," he mumbled as he followed the captain, trying hard to think of a way to get himself out of a situation that had the potential of being intensely more terrifying than facing a full battalion of Jem'Hadar soldiers.

### III – RECUPERATION

The Jem'Hadar were superior to the Vorta in almost every way. They were obviously stronger, they were faster with better reflexes and even their tactical reasoning was sharper. True, there were Vorta who possessed special telekinetic abilities but those were few and far between.

Telaka'clan perfectly understood the reason for the existence of the Vorta. After all, like the Jem'Hadar, they had been created by the gods, the Founders. And gods did not err. And the Vorta did have their uses. They were skilled administrators, diplomats, and scientists. They were also in charge of the Jem'Hadar and usually, First Telaka'clan would not have entertained a single objectionable thought about that fact. The Vorta gave orders and the Jem'Hadar obeyed. It was the order of things.

But Wegnour, the Vorta who had been put in charge of his unit, did not seem to appreciate the delicacies of covert warfare. At least that was what he assumed they were doing as Wegnour had not been very forthcoming since they had set out from their base in Cardassian territory.

They had been given a decently sized unit, coordinates far removed from any strategically important targets, and no conclusive explanation that would hint at their ultimate mission objectives.

The secrecy was near unbearable and as far as Telaka'clan was concerned, entirely unnecessary. They were Jem'Hadar after all, soldiers loyal to the end. If the Vorta ordered him to die for the Founders, then that was exactly what he would do. And gladly.

Instead, the secrecy would only endanger the successful outcome of this mission. The less he knew about what he and his men were to do, the less they could prepare. All this led Telaka'clan to assume that Wegnour was incompetent. He didn't know much about him, Jem'Hadar were not

required to know about their leaders, but it was obvious that he was a new and inexperienced model, perhaps even an original series, one that hadn't even been cloned yet, or at least not very often.

Clan stepped onto the command bridge of their vessel and immediately found the pale-skinned Vorta waiting for him. "You asked to see me."

Wegnour nodded absently. "Are your men ready?"

"They are."

"Good," he said and turned away from the first.

For a moment Telaka'clan simply stood there, staring at the Vorta's back.

Wegnour noticed. "Is there something else you wish to report?" he said without facing the soldier.

"I have prepared the men as you have instructed. However, you have not revealed our target or given me any instructions as to how to proceed."

The Vorta nodded slowly. "Indeed."

There was silence again. The three other Jem'Hadar who were working on the bridge turned their heads toward their commanders. The tension between the two of them was impossible to miss.

"At which time do you think will you disclose that information?" There was the slightest hint of defiance in the Jem'Hadar's tone. So slight, a non-Jem'Hadar may have missed it.

Wegnour sighed dramatically before he turned to face the first. "My orders come directly from the Founders themselves. This assignment is of the absolute highest importance to them. Seeing how sensitive this mission

is, you will only be told what is absolutely necessary and only when I feel the time is appropriate."

The Jem'Hadar threw a quick look at his men on the bridge who took the hint and promptly turned back to their respective stations. "Have the Founders ordered you to keep the details of this mission hidden from me?" he said when he faced the Vorta again. This time the defiance much more obvious.

Wegnour's facial expression distorted in anger and he took a quick step closer. Clan held his ground. "We already had this discussion and your continued questions are beginning to try my patience. I am the Vorta, I make the decisions. All you have to do is follow my orders and have your men ready to strike at my command. If you are unable to do this, tell me now and I will find somebody else who can."

Telaka'clan didn't move, not even a facial muscle. Instead, he remained perfectly still not unlike a stone statue.

When it became clear that the Jem'Hadar was not going to speak, Wegnour took a small breath and turned away again. "I hope for your sake that you are better at fighting than you are at taking my orders."

"I will follow every order you give me," he said in a tone of voice more befitting a machine than a sentient being.

The Vorta nodded slowly. "Yes, you will," he said and then turned around again. "Because you know what will happen if you do not," he added with a sinister grin. He took another step toward the First and reached for the small, clear tube that was affixed to the Jem'Hadar's jugular and fed him with the indispensable ketracel-white drug he required to live.

Telaka'clan continued to remain perfectly still even when the Vorta began to squeeze the tube slightly. It made him uncomfortable; he couldn't deny that. The drug was the only weakness he admitted to and he didn't

like to be reminded of his dependence. Like all Jem'Hadar he had come to accept it as part of who they were. But Wegnour was the first Vorta he had ever met who seemed to enjoy his power over him and his fellow soldiers. He could see it in his clear blue eyes. This man could not be trusted.

"I can sense that you understand," the Vorta said and quickly withdrew his hand as if he had been caught playing with a forbidden toy. "Just remember that all I do, all that we do, is for the good of the Dominion and the greater glory of the Founders. Now," he said as he turned again. "Have your first unit ready for a landing assignment; you will get further instructions later."

Telaka'clan did not move. For the first time in his short life, he had concerns. If Wegnour was truly incompetent then it would put at risk the entire mission. But Wegnour had the trust of the Founders and the Founders did not make mistakes. Therefore Wegnour simply could not be incompetent.

The Vorta had a look of irritation on his face when he realized that Telaka'clan was still present. "Go."

The First decided that for now, his only option was to assume that Wegnour knew exactly what he was doing. That he was perfectly able to deal with whatever this mission demanded of them. Because to assume otherwise would mean to bring into question not only Wegnour but the Founders as well. It was a thought he could not allow himself to have.

He gave the Vorta a quick nod and left the command bridge.

\* \* \*

"Don't tell him I said this but Captain Renik's dinner parties are not nearly as much fun as yours."

Owens laughed at Donners' joke about the Vulcan commanding officer of the *Syracuse* which had arrived only a few minutes earlier. He leaned back in his chair on the bridge, enjoying the wide smile on her larger-than-life face on the view screen.

"They'll have to do for now, I'm afraid. Trust me, this wasn't my idea."

Donners took on a more serious expression. "Just be careful out there, you never know what you're going to run into."

"From everything I've been told so far, this isn't much more than a glorified cargo mission. To be honest, I'm more worried about you," he said and quickly cited himself for the comment. He didn't want to appear too protective of her. He was still not entirely sure about his feelings toward Amaya. Or the fact that whatever feelings she had for him might change in an instant once he could get himself to tell her the truth about what had happened to them in an alternate timeline. But he couldn't help but be worried. After all Captain Renik's cold logic would not ensure her and Agamemnon's safety the way he had been able to. In times of war, it might have been a mistake to become emotionally attached to those who could lose their lives within a moment's notice but he was only human after all and to be emotional came with the species.

"Don't be," she said, sounding like her joyful self again. "My ship is faster, more powerful, and much prettier than yours."

"I might give you prettier," he said with a smirk.

Culsten turned from his chair to give the captain a concerned look. Clearly, he did not agree.

She chuckled. "Well, I don't want to keep you," she said. "And I'm sorry that I will miss Gene's grand performance."

Owens nodded slowly. "I'll let him know you said that. See you soon."

"Count on it. Agamemnon out."

And with that Amaya Donners' face disappeared from the view screen to be replaced by the image of her ship, positioned closely to the newly arrived USS *Syracuse*.

Repairs on *Agamemnon* were due to be completed within two hours. After that both ships would continue where *Eagle* and Amaya's ship had left off, locating and engaging hostiles, or a more likely scenario, being attacked by them. The idea had been to discourage the Dominion from using the Romulan border as a staging platform against Federation targets. The tactic was flawed, however. Two ships were not nearly enough to scare the Jem'Hadar but it was all that Starfleet could currently afford. So far encounters with the enemy had been tipped slightly in their favor and Owens could only hope that the trend would continue once *Eagle* had left.

"Mister Culsten, set heading one-seven-one mark two-eight-four," he said, trying hard to focus on the mission at hand instead.

"New course set."

"Best speed, Lieutenant."

"Aye sir, engaging at warp four point seven," he said and activated the necessary controls.

Moments later the ship jumped to faster-than-light speeds.

Owens stood. "I think there's a concert waiting for us."

Culsten left his station and was quickly replaced by Ensign Srena, *Eagle*'s new Andorian beta shift flight operator. The short, white-haired, and blue-skinned young woman took the station wordlessly.

"I cannot wait," the Krellonian said as he joined the captain on his way to the turbo-lift.

"We'll be seeing a whole new side of our first officer. Who would've thought we had a musical prodigy in our midst?" he said with a smirk. "Mister Trinik, you have the bridge."

The lanky Vulcan junior lieutenant at tactical nodded. "I have the bridge, aye sir," he said duly and stepped down to the command area.

"Can I ask you a question, sir?" Culsten said as he and they stepped into the turbo-lift.

"What's on your mind?"

"Do you really think the *Agamemnon* is a better-looking ship?"

Owens chuckled and gave the young helmsman a jovial clap on his back just before the lift doors closed and the car sped away.

\* \* \*

The illumination levels in the Nest had been dimmed significantly, the main source of light now being provided by the stars streaking past the large panorama windows at the very front.

Several unidentifiable shapes stood or sat near the panes, waiting patiently for their cue. Many of the chairs and tables had been removed to create the makeshift stage on which they were positioned.

At the opposite end of the room, near the bar counter, a large audience sat in semi-darkness, quietly talking amongst themselves. All senior officers had joined the event and a large number of the crew as well. The demand to see the concert had been much greater than the available space in the Nest would have allowed therefore, the internal sensors had been reconfigured to transmit both video and audio signals to computer screens throughout the ship.

A single figure stepped into the middle of the room and the voices quickly died down when a spotlight revealed Bensu to the audience.

The alien bartender dramatically cleared his throat and smiled widely. "And now for the moment you've all been waiting for," he said and then paused dramatically. "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you *Gene Edison and the Star Eagles!*"

A loud cheer came from the audience as the stage was finally revealed. Edison sat on the very right in front of a black Steinway & Sons grand piano. He shared the stage with the Efrosian nurse Leela Adams and assistant counselor Alex Clancy who both had violins braced against their necks. Next to the violinists stood security officer T'Nerr. The tall, fur-covered Catian held an instrument similar in style to a saxophone except that his featured three bells instead of just one. The last member of the band was Sergeant Shin-Ja Moon and the Marine's instrument of choice was a drum kit. All the musicians wore white and black dress uniforms except for Moon whose outfit slightly differed from that of his Starfleet colleagues.

The room became dead silent as a spotlight focused on Edison at the piano. He looked calm and focused as he stretched his fingers and then without any hesitation jumped right into playing the last movement of the *Piano Sonata Number Eleven* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, better known as the *Turkish March*.

He didn't get far. He hit a wrong note just a few moments into the movement and stopped, a look of embarrassment crossing his face.

The audience began to mumble at the unexpected false start and the other musicians looked toward their leader.

"That's not right," he said and then started again.

He missed the right note again, getting stuck at exactly the same spot as before.

The crowd became slightly more anxious this time.

The pianist shook his head and turned to the audience. A smile replaced his nervous frown. "Don't worry we're going to get through this," he said and adjusted the sheet music in front of him. "If it takes us all night."

Some of the audience members laughed but quickly went silent again when Edison began anew.

The third time proved to be the charm. A collective sigh of relief escaped from the audience when he found the right note and this time continued without interruption.

His rendition of the fast and upbeat classical tune turned out to be otherwise flawless and near the end of the composition, the rest of the band unexpectedly joined in and the piece transformed into a jazzy, up-tempo performance.

If the five musicians had had only very little time to rehearse, nobody seemed to notice as they continued to play a variety of musical pieces, one of the highlights being a solo by T'Nerr and his unusually shaped instrument, which produced melodies that seemed irreproducible by human-designed devices. Some shrill, some extraordinarily low but all uniquely harmonic.

Nora Laas paid close attention to all of the concert.

She had been surprised to find D'Karr sitting next to her. She had not thought the Klingon would have had any interest in this kind of music. But a short conversation before the recital had begun had revealed that he was an avid enthusiast of Klingon opera and therefore very curious about music popular in the Federation.

The few times she had spied his way she had been unable to tell if he enjoyed or disliked the performance. She knew that she found it all delightful. And she delighted in watching Edison play. She had never seen him like this. It seemed as if he was putting all his soul into his music, playing the piano almost as if he were possessed. It was obvious that he felt very passionately about music. Or at least had once.

The concert was nearing its end and Edison had elected to finish things with Ludwig van Beethoven's *Für Elise*.

Nora had never heard that particular piece of music before but she immediately fell in love with it. She also noticed that he was looking straight at the audience while tickling the ivories of his grand piano.

No, not the audience.

He was looking at her. Feeling a sudden rush of embarrassment, she turned away, hoping that he would focus on somebody else instead. But when she turned back - and she couldn't help herself but to do so - he was still looking in her direction. She quickly checked those around her but nobody seemed to notice that he had decided to isolate her.

Edison finished the piece, took a breath, and stood away from the piano.

The crowd erupted with applause. Captain Owens was the first to stand and soon everybody followed.

Edison and the other musicians bowed numerous times but the applause did not die down. Instead, several audience members demanded an encore. The first officer seemed quite flattered by the gesture but he was clearly exhausted. He quickly consulted with the others before he turned to address the crowd. It took a few moments before they let him speak.

"We are deeply thankful for your enthusiasm," he said, wiping his brow and taking a breath before continuing. "While we are delighted that you enjoyed our performance and elated by your wish for more, some of us really do need a break."

The audience showed their disappointment vocally.

"But our gifted violinists have agreed to continue to entertain us through the evening."

With that Adams and Clancy began to play anew choosing a light-hearted piece.

The audience was mostly appeased by the gesture.

The lights came back on slowly and most of the audience members began to leave their chairs to mix with the rest of the crowd or moved toward the bar in search of refreshments.

Michael Owens relocated to a table near the stage, watching the musicians play and sipping at his drink in the company of DeMara Deen, Xylion, and Louise Hopkins.

"This event was certainly a stroke of genius," he announced and his officers quickly agreed. He stood when he spotted his first officer approaching the table. "And here comes our very own superstar."

He shook his head slightly. "You are prone to exaggeration, sir."

"Gene, I'm the captain. On this ship what I say is the law. And if I say you were brilliant then you are in no position to argue with me," he said and shook his hand.

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said with a smile.

The others quickly joined in congratulating the first officer. "How come you've never told us you were this good?" Deen said.

"Music was my first love, but that was a long time ago. I was not sure I still felt about it the same way I once did."

"You certainly played it with true emotion," she said.

"I agree that the aesthetic qualities of your musical performance were quite fascinating. Your rendition of the Vulcan Moon Serenade was noteworthy. It is a challenging composition to master for a non-Vulcan performer," Xylion said.

"Why thank you, Xylion," he said with a smile. "I think."

"Join us for a drink?" Hopkins asked. "You certainly deserve one."

Owens nodded and pointed at an empty chair.

But Edison shook his head. "If you don't mind, I'd rather return to my quarters. It's been a long time since I've played this hard for this long. I think it took everything out of me."

"Of course," said Owens. "But I don't think you're going to be able to just slip out of here unnoticed," he added, gesturing toward the throng of people waiting to congratulate him.

Edison uttered a small sigh. "The price of fame," he said, giving a quick nod to the captain and the others before throwing himself into the crowd blocking his way to the exit.

"It must be difficult to be a celebrity," Hopkins said and sat down again, rubbing her temples.

Deen nodded absently. She was no stranger to garnering a great deal of attention herself.

"Lieutenant, are you not feeling well?" said Xylion once he had also sat down. "I have noticed that you have given much attention to your head this evening."

Hopkins offered him a wide grin, seemingly pleased with having his attention.

Xylion gave her an asking expression when she failed to bring forth any words.

"It's nothing, just a headache I haven't been able to shake all day," she said to break the silence that was threatening to turn awkward and then stood. "But I think I better turn in early tonight. Please excuse me," she said a little too hurriedly. She was out of the door before anyone could offer her a good night.

"Maybe the concert didn't quite agree with her," Owens said.

But Deen shook her head. "I don't think it was the music."

Xylion's expression remained neutral, not showing the slightest hint that he was aware of her insinuation.

Moments after Hopkins' sudden departure Bensu approached the table. "I hope everybody here enjoyed the show."

"Very much so," Ownes said.

"I'm glad to hear that."

Owens considered the bartender for a moment. He was certain he had as many questions about Bensu as most others on board. And it was not because he was suspicious of the man. After all, he was well aware that Starfleet had cleared him to be on *Eagle* as it had any other civilian on board and he knew that Command was usually reluctant to allow non-Starfleet servicemembers on starships during times of war. In fact, this strange exception only added to the mystery surrounding the barkeeper.

"Why don't *you* join us," he said.

"It would be my pleasure," he said and took the chair Hopkins had vacated.

"I understand you have known Mister Xylion for quite some time," Owens said.

Bensu nodded. "Yes, we've been close for..."

"Many decades," Xylion said, completing the sentence.

Owens was surprised by the Vulcan's uncharacteristically imprecise response. "That would make you quite seasoned, Mister Bensu."

"Please, plain Bensu will do," he said. "And yes, I have been around for a while, you could say that," he added with a wide smile.

"I suppose it would be rude of me to try and pry a number out of you."

"I know humans do not like to be reminded of their age. I do share that sentiment," Bensu said with no sign of irritation in his voice. His upbeat demeanor not perturbed in the slightest.

Owens decided to give up on his line of questioning. He had only recently started to become concerned with his own age. He had felt older than he had in a long time and that realization had come very sudden to him.

Something in Bensu's eyes told him that the bartender knew exactly how he was feeling.

"Somebody once said that we are only as old as we feel. I like to think that is true," said Bensu and looked at Xylion. "Of course, my Vulcan friend here would disagree. He counts his years as precisely as a warp field theorist counts cochrane levels."

"Age is a reality of life. It is not logical to delude oneself about reality."

Bensu laughed and Owens couldn't help but join in. Deen barely smiled.

"See what I mean? Oh..." he stopped when he noticed a line forming by the bar. "I better return to my duties before you have a mutiny on your hands," he said and stood.

Owens nodded. "A pleasure talking to you."

"I assure you, the pleasure was all mine, Captain," he said and looked at Deen. "Speaking my mind is my preferred cure to most perturbations."

She glanced at him with a surprised look on her face.

But Bensu had already moved on to Xylion instead. "Come on, I'll let you jump the line, old boy," he said pointing at his empty class.

Xylion nodded and followed him to the bar.

"What do you think he meant by that?" Owens said.

She slowly shook her head. "I have no idea."

"You know for some reason I don't think I believe you. You've been acting rather strange over the last few days. I feel as if half my crew is going crazy."

"Just half?" she said with a minuscule smile gracing her lips. But her attempted humor failed to convince on this occasion.

Owens took another sip from his drink, sensing that her recent worries were of a more personal nature. And it was also quite clear that she did not wish to talk to him about them. It was an unusual choice for her, he realized, but he respected it nevertheless. They both remained in silence as they continued to enjoy the rendition of *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, deftly played by the pair of violinists on stage.

\* \* \*

"Captain, we're approaching the Tarsas system," said the helmsman. "Starbase 74 is located in orbit around the third planet."

"Take us out of warp, Lieutenant. Set an approach vector for the starbase."

"Aye, sir"

*Eagle* slowed down until she dropped to sub-light speed. She slightly turned so that her bow was pointed at the massive facility in orbit around the blue planet. The starbase was shaped very much like a mushroom with a wide, umbrella-like upper part and a long shaft protruding downward. Thousands of brightly illuminated windows lit up the structure like a Christmas tree. *Eagle* headed for the upper part of the base.

Owens got up from his chair and turned to the young Vulcan officer who was currently manning the tactical station behind him. "Lieutenant Trinik, hail the starbase and request permission to dock."

He nodded curtly and pressed a couple of control panels on his console. After a few seconds a sound chimed from his station. The lieutenant looked up. "Permission granted, sir."

Owens turned to face the helm. "Take us in, Mister Culsten. Cut impulse engines, maneuvering thrusters half power, you know the drill."

"Yes, sir."

The space doors were fully opened when *Eagle* passed through them. The starship entered a spacious docking area that would have easily allowed harboring dozens of starships *Eagle*'s size. Currently, there were only four other ships docked there, a telltale sign of the ship shortage that had plagued the fleet since the war had begun. And the ships anchored here didn't look anywhere near battle-ready. The two older *Excelsior*-class vessels seemed to be undergoing a major refit and one of *Eagle*'s sister ships, a *Nebula*-class cruiser, was quite noticeably missing both its warp nacelles.

The only exception and the real looker of the bunch was the fourth vessel perched in its berth. Clearly much newer and more advanced than any of the other ships, it was also slightly smaller than *Eagle*, making it look bulky in comparison. It looked as if it had been designed for speed with a narrow and elongated saucer section and an aerodynamically shaped hull. The design was all style and the ship possessed a presence that demanded to be noticed.

Culsten uttered a low whistle. "Now that's a beauty," he said, his eyes glued on the screen.

"The USS *Sovereign*," Trinik said as the bridge crew gobbled up the view. "The first ship of her class. Six hundred-eighty-five meters long, two hundred-forty meters wide, twenty-four decks, maximum cruising speed; warp nine point nine seven five."

Owens carefully inspected the *Sovereign* as *Eagle* slid past her. She was a beauty all right. But he had long given up on comparing starships. *Eagle* was his ship and as far as he was concerned, it would be the best ship in the fleet until the day it went out of commission.

"Impressive," Culsten said. "But if she's so great, how come she's hiding in here instead of fighting in the big battles?"

Owens smiled. He didn't have an answer but he appreciated the lieutenant's loyalty.

*Eagle* slipped into its assigned berth and came to a complete standstill. Umbilical connectors and a gangway were attached to the outer hull to connect it to the starbase.

"Docking procedure completed," Deen reported from ops. "Warp core is idle and we're on ground power."

"Repair crews stand ready to board," added the Vulcan tactical officer.

Owens nodded. "Good job, everybody. Have the starbase teams coordinate with Lieutenant Hopkins," he said and then tapped his badge to open a comlink. The ship's computer was perfectly capable of opening a channel by identifying his voice commands but some habits were hard to break. "Owens to Commander Xylion."

It took the Vulcan less than a second to reply over the intercom. "*This is Lieutenant Commander Xylion speaking.*"

"Commander, we just docked at the starbase. Could you please tend to the cargo we are supposed to bring on board? Make sure it all gets squared away as soon as possible?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me know when everything is on board. Owens out," he said and headed for the adjacent ready room. "Dee, bridge is yours," he said just before he reached the doors and disappeared.

Deen got up from her station and took the command chair.

Culsten turned around to look at her. "How does it feel to be in charge in a space dock?" he said with a grin.

"Better than sitting at the helm and wisecracking all day," she said with the tiniest smile on her face.

He clearly wasn't sure if she was joking or not and decided against a rebuttal, refocusing his attention on securing his station instead.

\* \* \*

Louise Hopkins found sickbay busier than she had anticipated. Their most recent battle was three days old and yet most of the beds were still filled with recovering patients. She felt uneasy. She wasn't supposed to be here.

"Do you need assistance, sir?"

The question was posed by Nurse Leela Adams who had approached the chief engineer without her even noticing.

"You were in the concert yesterday, weren't you?"

Adams smiled. "Proud member of the *Star Eagles*."

"You were very good, really."

"Thank you. Do you require medical assistance?"

Hopkins seemed surprised by the question and looked at the nurse as if she had just asked an absurd question. "Me? No, not really."

Adams nodded and moved on. She was clearly too busy with the other patients to have time for idle chitchat.

Hopkins observed the young half-Efrosian nurse for a moment before she turned back toward the exit. She hadn't made one step when the doors slid open and Wenera walked in, nearly running right into the chief engineer.

"I'm sorry," Wenera apologized quickly.

"My mistake, I didn't pay attention."

Wenera smiled. "Listen, while you're here, perhaps you could help me with something."

"Sure," Hopkins said and followed Wenera into her office, adjacent to the main ward.

"I'm afraid I'm just completely useless when it comes to machines," she said as she stepped to a large medical device situated near her desk. "This darn thing simply stopped accepting any tissue samples."

"I'll have a look for you," Hopkins said and began operating the control console on the device.

Wenera watched her with curiosity.

"By the way," Hopkins said. "Congratulations on the concert yesterday. I think it was a resounding success."

Wenera nodded. "I think you're right. Who would have known we had such talented musicians on board?"

"It didn't take you long to find them all. Ah," she said and opened a side panel. "Here's the problem."

Wenera moved closer to look over her shoulder.

"The primary EPS converter seems eroded."

Wenera returned the chief engineer's look with an empty gaze.

"It's like a blocked artery."

The doctor smiled. "My tissue sampler has high blood pressure?"

"I guess you could say that. I'll get somebody up here with the right tools to fix this."

"Thanks, Louise. I guess we work in similar fields, don't we?"

"You mean we both fix things?"

The doctor laughed. "Yeah." She stopped when she noticed Hopkins rubbing her temple. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing serious Just a little headache."

"Sit down and let *me* have a look," she said, pointed at her chair, and picked up a medical tricorder.

She complied only hesitantly. "I really don't think this is worth your time."

"Oh really?" she said as she began to pass the tricorder by her forehead. "I bet this has been bothering you for a while. And no wonder," she said and gave her a stern look. "You have a mild concussion."

"Oh."

"How did this happen?"

"I hit my head."

Wenera nodded. "You must have been in quite some pain," she said and began loading a hypo. "Why didn't you come by sooner?"

"You've all been quite busy with a lot of patients lately. And I'm sure they were in a much worse condition. I didn't want to -"

"You know what happens if you don't take your own health seriously?" Wenera interrupted and then continued without waiting for a reply. "You become sloppy and make mistakes. You might pass out while working on a delicate ship system and suddenly you're not only endangering yourself but the people you work with as well. Maybe the entire crew."

Hopkins nodded slowly, like a school kid getting lectured. "I know that but -"

"No buts," Wenera said and administered the hypo. "The next time you feel unwell you come here right away. We might be too busy to take care of you but we will take note and perhaps give you something for temporary relief. It makes no sense for you to try and be a hero by thinking you can deal with your pain by yourself."

"That does feel a lot better," Hopkins said with a smile and slightly stretched her neck.

"Of course, it does," Wenera placed the tricorder back onto the table and sat down behind her desk. "But you better take it easy for the next few days and if you feel any more pain -"

"I'll come see you. Yes, I know."

Wenera nodded. "Listen, I'm sorry if I came across a bit preachy -"

"A bit," she said with a sly smirk.

"A lot of people on this ship think that they are somehow immune to being sick. I think it's a prevailing attitude among starship crews. Sometimes I wonder why I'm even here," she said as her thoughts seemed to drift off.

"I know how you feel."

"You?" Wenera said with surprise. "You're the chief engineer. You keep the ship running. Without you, it would surely fall apart."

Hopkins sighed. "Don't get me wrong I love my job. It's just that I never signed up for all this. The war, the deaths, the destruction ..."

The doctor nodded slowly. "Nobody signed up for that, Louise."

"I know. But sometimes it seems that everybody seems to be dealing with it a whole lot better than I do. I haven't told this to anybody but sometimes I feel scared just getting up in the morning, worrying whose funeral I'll have to attend to in the evening."

"We all feel like that. Every single one of us. It's just a matter of hiding it in a way that won't distract us from doing our work. You do it too, Louise. How else would you find the strength to keep this ship in one piece?"

She considered the doctor's words for a moment. "How do you hide it? Your fears, I mean."

Wenera leaned back in her chair, a small sigh escaping her lips. "If there is one thing we haven't had a shortage of since this war has started, it's injured crewmembers. When the fighting starts and those doors begin to open," she said, pointing at the main entrance to sickbay, "they don't stay closed for long. I cannot afford to think about my fears. I stay focused on how to treat my patients. And I remain thankful that that's all I have to do."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. We're the lucky ones. We simply do our jobs, fix things, as you put it. We're not up there making the decision that will affect hundreds of lives. Deciding who might live and who might not."

Hopkins found herself agreeing with the doctor. "I've never looked at it that way."

They both sat in silence for a few moments, contemplating their respective places in life.

Then she stood again. "Well, I better get back to engineering before the starbase crew makes a mess of everything."

Wenera smiled at her. "You'll remember my sick tissue sampler if you find the time?"

"I'll have a tech doc up here before the end of the day," she said with a smile of her own. When she reached the door to the office she turned back around. "Thanks for the talk."

"Any time, Louise," the raven-haired doctor said as she looked up from her desk.

She offered the other woman a curt nod and made a quick beeline for the exit.

\* \* \*

'He that shall live this day, and see old age, will yearly on the vigil feast with his neighbors, and say 'tomorrow is Saint Crispian. Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars, and say 'These wounds I had on Crispian's

day.' Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot, but he'll remember, with advantages, what feats he did that day. Then shall our names, familiar in his mouth as household words - Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter, Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester - be in their flowing cups freshly remembered. This story shall the good man teach his son; and Crispian shall never go by, from this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remembered - We few, we happy few, we band of brothers -'

The intercom signaled an incoming call. "*Lieutenant Hopkins to Captain Owens.*"

Owens sighed as he placed the thick leather-bound volume he held in his hands down onto his chest. Only a few minutes earlier he had finally finished with the seemingly insurmountable heap of paperwork and as a reward he had made himself comfortable on his couch in his ready room, laying on his back with his feet up, and returned to a classic favorite of his. A story over seven hundred years old and yet still strangely relevant. It was a story of war, of sacrifice, and of bravery. It was a story that gave him a small amount of comfort in these dark times.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"Sir, I just thought I'd inform you that the repairs are nearly completed. The starbase maintenance crew just finished replacing our main deflector dish and installed a brand-new warp coil in the port nacelle."

"Very good."

"Warp drive is now fully functional and weapons will be completed within three hours," the chief engineer continued, unaware of the captain's lackadaisical attitude.

"Carry on, Lieutenant," he said and picked up his book again.

"Uh, sir?"

Owens froze and looked up at the ceiling as if Hopkins could somehow spot the growing frown on his face.

"This puts our repairs two hours ahead of schedule. With your permission, I'd like to run a level two diagnostic of our -"

"How long?"

"Two hours. Two and a half at the most."

"Very good, proceed. Owens out."

With the comms link terminated, he returned to his book. Hopkins was young but she was a more than competent engineer. He knew that she didn't need to be held by the hand to do what she thought was right for the ship. He had no concerns when he continued reading where he had left off.

'This story shall the good man teach his son; and Crispian shall never go by, from this day to the ending of the world, but we in it shall be remembered - We few, we happy few, we band of brothers - for he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother; be he never so vile, this day shall gentle his condition; and gentlemen in -'

"Edison to the Captain."

Owens was beginning to wonder if his crew was actively conspiring to keep him from enjoying his scarce free time. He put the book down again. "Commander."

"Sir, Hopkins just informed me that our repairs are two hours -"

"Ahead of schedule," Owens said. "Yes, I'm aware, Gene. She already told me and I gave her the go-ahead for her diagnostic of..." he stopped himself, suddenly painfully aware that he had no idea what the chief engineer had wanted to diagnose.

"I apologize, sir, I did not realize that she had spoken to you already. In that case, I would like to meet with you to discuss the crew evaluations. We have some spare time while we are parked in the starbase which would give us an excellent opportunity to get those out of the way."

While Hopkins was competent, Edison certainly was efficient. Too efficient at the moment. He was right, of course. For the first time in a few weeks, the crew had some downtime on their hands and this was exactly why he had decided to catch up on some reading. He had no desire to spoil that opportunity.

He reached for a padd that lay on the floor next to the couch and glanced at it. "Commander, didn't we decide to have the ship run on a skeleton crew for the duration of this mission to increase free time and morale? Why don't you take a day off yourself? I'm sure you could use it after your energetic performance yesterday."

"Sir, I think the ship would be better served if I caught up on some work."

"The ship would be best served for you to be relaxed and at the top of your game once we return to the fight."

"If that's how you feel."

"I do," he said, harshly. "Take a day off, Gene," he added in a softer tone. "Relax, go use the holodeck, visit Tarsas, just try not to think of work."

Owens could practically see his first officer's smirk as he spoke again. "*Relaxation? I hear you loud and clear, sir. Edison out.*"

He dropped the padd and returned to the book.

'For he today that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother; be he never so vile, this day shall gentle his condition; and gentlemen in England now abed shall think themselves accursed they were not—'

This time it was the door chime that forced him to stop.

You've got to be kidding me.

"Come," he nearly shouted.

The doors to the ready room parted and *Eagle*'s Vulcan science officer entered. He seemed surprised for less than a second when he did not find Owens sitting in his chair where he had expected him.

Owens realized that he was not going to get a chance to finish his book. He removed a large red bookmark, placed it into the open tome, and then closed it. "Commander Xylion," he said as he stood and walked over to his desk, placed the book on his table, and sat in his chair. He was about to invite the science officer to take a seat but he knew that the Vulcan would prefer to stand.

Xylion noticed the leather-bound book. "William Shakespeare," he said with curiosity and raised one of his eyebrows.

"Yes," Owens said, pleased at his interest in his favorite dramatist. "Henry the Fifth. Are you familiar with it?"

Xylion nodded slightly. "I have studied all of William Shakespeare's works but I could not fully determine the reason for his popularity on Earth."

He was surprised by his answer. "You don't like Shakespeare, Mister Xylion?"

"I do not have any feelings toward the author either way. However, I have found many of his works exceedingly verbose, historically inaccurate,

exaggerated and either glorifying militaristic aspects of your culture or nationalistic in tone.”

“Well, I guess you have to account for the time and cultural context these works were written. Besides Shakespeare is not about historic accuracy,” Owens said, trying not to sound too defensive.

“In that case what would you consider the purpose of his writings?”

“It’s about …” Owens couldn’t think of a fitting reply. “Entertainment. And many of his works are about basic human nature. Some of which remain relevant to this day. And it’s about art and poetry. The emotions his words invoke,” he said, quickly realizing that he had likely already lost the Vulcan.

Xylion didn’t reply, instead, he gave his commanding officer an empty look as if he expected him to say something more meaningful.

Owens gave up with a sigh. “Commander, am right in assuming you didn’t come here to discuss Earth literature?”

“You are correct,” he said and handed him a padd. “I have reviewed the cargo manifest and I believe you will find it very deficient.”

Owens took the padd and glanced over it. Xylion had not exaggerated. In fact, the list didn’t seem to be forthcoming at all about what *Eagle* was to take on board. The long list consisted mainly of numbers with no descriptions or indications as to what the cargo consisted of. Owens knew enough about freight transportation that this manifest did not correspond with any regulations. “This is unusual. Did you contact the starbase personnel?”

“The responsible officer insisted that the starbase received the cargo in the exact same manner.”

He nodded and looked up from the padd. "Well, I don't see what we can do about it then. I'm sure Starfleet is not having us transport a ticking time bomb without telling us," he said and forced a small smile on his lips.

"You might find the last entries on the list particularly interesting," Xylion said, either ignoring or missing the captain's attempted humor.

He scrolled down to the bottom of the list. "Four type-nine shuttle craft with special configuration, ten type-twelve phaser batteries, and *three hundred* mission specialists?"

"I assume that particular part of the cargo was too obvious as not to be referred to in the manifest," Xylion said.

"No kidding. The shuttles and the batteries I can understand but three hundred people? Throl could've warned me about that. Last time I checked we weren't a troop transport."

"Do you wish me to postpone the embarkation proceedings?"

He shook his head. "No. The admiral made it quite clear that we're working on a tight schedule. Just try to make enough room on the crew decks to accommodate our guests," he said and handed the padd back to Xylion.

"Understood," he said. "I have been informed of an additional person to come aboard not mentioned in the manifest."

"Who is it?"

"A Federation special agent to supervise this mission. Her name is Jana Tren. She is scheduled to board *Eagle* at twenty-two hundred hours."

Jana Tren.

Owens was like petrified upon hearing the name. He knew it well and yet it had been a long time since he had heard it. His mind was immediately flooded by long-forgotten memories.

“Sir?”

“Yes,” he said and slowly looked up to meet the Vulcan’s gaze. “Are you absolutely certain her name is Jana Tren? No mistake?” He didn’t even consider how little sense his question made considering that Xylion was notorious for not making such obvious mistakes.

“There is no mistake,” he said showing no signs of being insulted. “Is there a problem, sir?”

“No, no problem. You can go now.”

If Xylion was still irritated by the captain’s behavior he didn’t show it. Instead, he simply gave him a curt nod and left the ready room.

Owens had lied to Xylion. There was a problem. There was a big problem and it was called Jana Tren.

Tren had been his first serious relationship. He had met the strong-willed Betazoid during his freshman year at the Academy and he had fallen in love with her dark, powerful eyes the first time he had seen them.

It had taken him four months to muster up the confidence to even speak to her. Back then he had been a shy and introverted young man and an average cadet at best.

He still partially credited her for his eventual transformation into a self-confident individual, no longer scared of taking calculated risks. It was she who had helped to make him the man he was today. They had started out as friends but it had quickly become a whole of a lot more. They had loved each other passionately. He could hardly think back to his time as a cadet without her at his side.

But their relationship had fallen apart by the end of their time at the Academy. It had ended like many of those relationships had. He graduated before her and was assigned to a ship exploring the opposite side of the galaxy. They lost touch soon after and sometimes he deeply regretted that fact. Did he still have feelings for her? Honestly, he wasn't sure.

It had been eighteen years since he had last seen her and he had no idea what she had been up to. He had no idea how she felt about him now and, for that matter, what it would feel like to see her again after all this time.

He didn't even know what he was supposed to feel like.

All he knew was that he suddenly dreaded this unexpected reunion. Jana could have easily changed the course of his life back then. And perhaps he feared that she could do so again. Perhaps he feared that he would like her to.

The galaxy had a funny way of playing with their fates, he wondered as he tried to prepare himself to come face-to-face with the first woman he had ever truly loved.

## IV – PASSION

Nora Laas exited the turbo-lift on deck eight and headed toward the first officer's quarters.

She had hoped that she could use the time *Eagle* was sidelined to work on a new drill plan for her security team. Instead, Gene Edison had contacted her and asked to discuss crew evaluations. She couldn't say that she was looking forward to that. Not because she had a problem with evaluating her people but because the idea of being stuck in a room with Edison all day after he had made his feelings about the direction of their relationship quite clear. Now she dreaded the awkwardness that would inevitably exist in their working relationship.

She found his quarters and activated the door chime. The panels slid open almost instantly and without giving it another thought, she stepped inside. Not a moment after she had entered, the doors slid shut again.

The quarters were completely dark.

Even the windows had been sealed.

“Commander?”

There was no reply.

“Computer, lights.”

But even the computer refused to acknowledge her command.

Her instincts immediately told her to call in an emergency and to get a security detail to back her up. But *Eagle* was securely nestled inside one of the safest places in the entire sector; there wasn't much that could warrant an emergency while docked to the starbase.

She spotted a faint light coming from the adjacent room and slowly approached. "Gene, what's going on?"

She realized that she had stepped into the bedroom. The light level was just high enough for her to notice something lying on the bed. She looked around once more – not spotting anything else of interest – and then approached the bed. There, on top of the sheets, she found a large bright blue cover and a data padd. She picked up the padd.

*Open it, it said in large lettering.*

Nora turned around suspiciously but found that she was alone. "What is this?"

Her only reward was silence.

She sighed and turned back toward the bed. She placed the padd aside and carefully opened the cover to reveal a shimmering black and silver dress.

Nora was not a dress person.

She had never even owned a dress and could hardly remember the last time she had worn one. She had never had much reason to since her life had been the exact opposite of being glamorous. While other young women all over the galaxy went to balls or formal dinners and dances she had laid in the mud, planning the next strike against the occupiers of her home world.

Her lack of an elegant lifestyle, however, did not lessen her appreciation for the beauty of the dress that was before her now. The long, strapless gown was made out of several layers of delicate black and silver silks that shimmered excitingly even under the little light in the bedroom.

Nora couldn't help herself and laughed.

The padd on the bed beeped and when she glanced at it, she found that the text had changed.

Put it on. Promise I won't peek.

"You better not," she said with mock sincerity.

The doors to the bedroom closed and once Nora was certain that she was alone, she quickly began to strip out of her uniform, all of a sudden quite curious to see what she'd look like in the alien apparel.

It took her a while to figure out exactly how to put it on but after a few trials and errors, she was satisfied. As she looked down, she discovered a small box at her feet containing a pair of matching high-heel shoes. Like the dress, they fit perfectly.

No sooner she had slipped into the shoes she heard a soft tune coming from the living room. She glanced herself over in a large mirror in the washroom, quite pleased with her appearance, then took a deep breath and walked toward the door leading back into the main room.

The doors slid open as she approached and as she walked through the doorframe, she was surprised to find the room quite different than what it had been when she had first come in.

The speakers were playing a familiar flute melody that she recognized as a composition from Verani, a legendary Bajoran musician. The room was illuminated now. But most of it came from a very unlikely source. Several candles had been placed around the room. The brightest ones were lighting up the table at the center that had been prepared for a dinner for two.

Right by the table stood Gene Edison with a wide smile on his face. He was dressed in an elegant white shirt and black trousers. She found himself admiring him for a moment before she spoke. "What's all this?"

"I thought that would be obvious," he said as he stepped closer.

"It certainly isn't the right setup to discuss crew evaluations."

Edison reached out for her and pulled her closer, kissing her passionately.

She went along with it at first but then pushed away, leaving him with a surprised look on his face. "I don't understand."

"What is there not to understand?"

Nora felt herself becoming angry. Was he playing with her? After all, he had been quite obvious how he felt about their relationship the other day and now he had turned around one hundred eighty degrees. It didn't seem to make any sense to her. She wondered if all men behaved like that. She could not claim to have exhaustive experience in that area. But she knew that she would not let him use her as if she was nothing more than a plaything he could draw upon whenever he felt like it.

She defiantly crossed her arms in front of her chest becoming increasingly self-conscious of how much skin she was revealing. "I think I deserve a little bit more of an explanation. You think you can just get me here, dress me up, and play your little games and everything is all right?"

Edison took on a more serious expression and nodded slowly, clearly chastised. "I'm sorry, Laas, you're right."

She wanted to embrace him but she knew she had to maintain a tough demeanor if this – whatever *this* was – should ever work. And if there was one thing she knew how to do it was being tough.

"I made a mistake," he said and turned away.

"What?" she said with surprise. That had not been what she had wanted to hear. She stepped up behind him. "Listen, I'd be lying if I said that I didn't think that this was exciting. I mean look at me."

He turned around.

"I'm wearing a dress for prophet's sake," she added with a smile.

"You do look breathtaking in it."

She tried hard not to blush. "So what are we going to do about that?" she said with a smirk.

Edison remained serious. "A few days ago, after Lutira Rei died in my arms I felt as if being with you would be a grave mistake. I didn't see a future for us."

Nora's face visibly dropped at the sudden revelation.

"Nobody knows what these times will hold except for the fact that all our lives could end at a moment's notice. I thought that being with you, right here and now, could become too great a risk for the both of us. That the only choice we had was to maintain a professional relationship and keep our feelings aside."

"What do you think now?" she said, somewhat afraid of the answer.

"I realized that I had it all wrong."

"How so?"

"We're all living on borrowed time but if I died tomorrow I would want to spend the last night of my life with you. I love you, Laas."

For a moment her heart stopped beating and the world around her stood still. No man had ever uttered those three words to her. She had sometimes imagined what it would be like to hear them, to hear them from him. She had thought that she would know exactly how she would feel. Now she suddenly realized that she had been utterly unprepared.

"I love you, too."

They kissed again but this time neither one of them stopped. Dinner was forgotten as they drifted toward the bedroom.

\* \* \*

Most of *Eagle*'s crewmembers who were not involved in the repairs or the large-scale cargo loading effort had taken the first officer's advice and retreated to the starbase or the more than pleasant planet below. This way they could not only take full advantage of the many recreational opportunities available, they would also be out of the way of those who remained behind, trying to get thousands of tons of cargo onto the ship in very little time.

The schedule for getting the cargo for the outpost in the Ligos system on board was very tight and Commander Xylion had been forced to improvise to meet the deadline. His solution had been to utilize not only shuttles and transporters but also to have crewmembers load the cargo manually, using antigrav units to move heavy crates across the gangway that connected the ship with the base. Many of *Eagle*'s once spotless and spacious corridors were now littered with containers of all shapes and sizes, effectively transforming them into obstacle courses.

So'Dan Leva uttered a curse under his breath as he tried to get from the main bridge to a cargo bay. A journey that was supposed to take no less than two minutes had already consumed nearly a quarter of an hour as he had to avoid not only immovable objects but also several crewmembers who kept adding to the chaos by moving cargo in and out of the corridors. If there was a system to the way they worked, Leva could not see it.

He had been trying to fix a glitch with the main torpedo launchers that had started to act up ever since the Klingon's unconventional use of the

navigational deflector. Both systems were closely integrated and damage to the dish had caused a malfunction with the launchers. Not only was he annoyed that he had to replace the torpedo guidance system because of a maneuver he was sure could have been handled more gracefully, he had also found that Xylion had reserved all transporters for beaming aboard cargo.

With the guidance system weighing in at nearly three tons, transporting it manually was out of the question. Especially now that all the corridors had become close to impassable. *Eagle* could not leave the starbase without a fully functional weapons system and Leva was determined to find the Vulcan science officer and demand a solution.

He rounded a bend and was almost able to spot his destination. Just as it seemed that the worst of the obstacles lay behind him, he ran right into a young Tellarite crewman who was attempting to lift a good-sized box onto a staple of crates.

The man immediately lost his balance and the box slipped out of his hands only to smash open and scatter hand phasers all over the deck.

“Sorry, sir,” the Tellarite apologized gruffly even though it had clearly not been his fault.

Leva stared at the weapons for a moment before he met the Tellarite’s glance. His large eyes and his snout-like nose showed defiance but when he saw the chief tactical officer’s determined visage, he quickly backed up and began to pick up the phasers.

“Just watch what you’re doing next time.”

The young crewman hardly even acknowledged him as he continued to pick up the scattered weaponry.

“Lieutenant Commander.”

Leva turned and quickly wished he hadn't. The voice belonged to D'Karr, the Klingon exchange officer and the one person on board he had no interest whatsoever to speak to. The broad-shouldered warrior seemed unperturbed by his heavy sigh as he approached.

"I recommended several improvements to the ship's main phaser emitters. Chief Engineer Hopkins advised me to speak to you."

Leva scrutinized the large Klingon for a few moments, considering how to answer him. He then thought better of it and turned to leave. "I don't have time for that."

D'Karr almost leaped after the tactical officer which caused Leva to whip around suddenly as if to brace himself for an incoming attack.

The Klingon recognized Leva's confrontational pose. He barred his teeth and his body tensed, readying for battle.

"What exactly is your problem, Lieutenant?"

D'Karr took a step closer as though expecting the other man to be intimidated. Leva refused to yield. "What is *your* problem, Romulan?" He almost spat the last word. He didn't give the now obviously disgusted Leva a chance to reply, however. "You think I enjoy working with you? A Romulan?"

"Half-Romulan."

D'Karr continued as if he hadn't spoken. "If I like it or not, we are allies and that means that we have to work together. I have enough honor within me to overlook your heritage. You on the other hand don't even seem to grasp the concept."

"Honor?" Leva said and uttered a cynical laugh. "You Klingons throw that word around as if you invented it. I'm yet to meet a Klingon that would bring justice to the term."

D'Karr grunted with anger. "If this were a Klingon ship -"

"It isn't," leva said before he could finish. "And you would do well to remember this. We do not prescribe to your ridiculous and barbaric traditions. For the time being you'll be serving among civilized people so you better get used to the idea. And as your superior officer, I shall dictate the terms and times at which you may confer with me. Right now, I have neither the time nor the inclination to do so."

D'Karr and Leva stared into each other's eyes, neither one willing to break contact first. It was the Klingon who ended the silence. "You are a true credit to your race," he said with noticeable repugnance in his tone. "It does not surprise me in the least that your people decided to stay out of this war, preferring to sit back and watch it from a safe distance instead."

D'Karr seemed to realize that he could not allow himself to attack a superior officer while he was serving on a Starfleet ship. But that didn't mean that he couldn't try to provoke Leva to make the first move.

"You'd be wise to remember one thing," Leva said calmly. "The Federation and the Klingons are allies. The two of us are not. Dismissed."

D'Karr didn't budge. Not right away. Instead, they exchanged another icy glare before the Klingon finally turned and headed back the way he had come from.

As Leva watched D'Karr leave he couldn't help but experience an undeniable feeling of satisfaction. He had not yet won this fight but the first round had most clearly gone to him.

He noticed that the Tellarite crewman had stopped cleaning up the corridor and was now glancing right in his direction, clearly having overheard most of the argument

"What are you looking at?"

The crewman shrugged his shoulders.

"Carry on," he said sharply and turned to head toward the cargo bay.

He couldn't care less what the crew thought of his behavior. As far as he was concerned, he was entirely justified in treating D'Karr the way he had. He hadn't exaggerated when he had pointed out that he considered Klingons to be an uncivilized people, stuck in a society of hopelessly archaic customs.

D'Karr would have to learn that he was entirely out of place on *Eagle* and if necessary, he would be the one to teach him.

\* \* \*

Owens squeezed past several large crates to get into the transporter room. Inside he found Xylion delegating crewmen to pick up even more crates that had only just beamed onboard.

"Commander."

Xylion turned to face his commanding officer. "Sir, Ms. Tren stands ready to beam aboard as soon as we have cleared the transporter room."

Owens nodded slowly, trying hard to keep a calm and collected appearance. Under the surface he was anything but. He had not been able to stop thinking about Jana Tren since Xylion had announced her visit earlier. Eighteen years was a long time and he did not know what to expect. He did not know what she would expect.

A sudden thought shot through his head. "Ms. Tren?"

Xylion raised an eyebrow, a sign that he did not understand what the captain was implying.

"She isn't married?" he said, regretting the words the instant they had come over his lips.

"I am not aware of Agent Tren's marital status," Xylion said. "Are you acquainted with Agent Tren?"

"No," Owens said and then quickly shook his head. "I mean, yes. Once. Some time ago." He forced a painful smile at his clumsy explanation but Xylion did not appear irritated.

A crewman cleared the last crate from the transporter pad.

"We're ready for transport," said Chief Yang Sen Chow from his station behind the control console.

"Sir?"

He looked at Xylion as if noticing him for the first time. Only then did he realize that everybody was waiting for his command. "Of course. Commander, is there a chance you could give us a moment of privacy?"

Xylion nodded and without hesitation stepped out of the room.

Owens turned to Chow. "I'm sorry chief, please proceed."

The bubbly man nodded with his typically wide smile. "Energizing."

Owens took a quick breath and braced himself.

As the light and energy came together to assemble the figure of a woman, Owens couldn't help but start feeling extremely self-conscious. Did his hair look all right? How about his breath? Was his uniform correctly aligned? He couldn't remember having felt this nervous since he had been a cadet at the Academy. He was utterly unprepared for this

meeting and had the sudden urge to bolt out of the room. It was way too late for that.

Jana Tren appeared in front of him.

She looked almost exactly the way he had remembered her.

Her brunette hair still just about past her shoulders, her dark eyes intensely focused and shimmering with the brilliance of a pair of stars. Her tanned skin seemed as smooth and soft as back when he had first met her. There didn't appear to be a single additional gram to her athletic frame.

There was a noticeable difference to the young Cadet Tren he had once known so intimately.

She looked more serious, more professional, accentuated by the formal, gray two-piece suit she wore.

She looked human in all respect but Owens knew better. She was a Betazoid quite able to sense people's emotions, making this reunion that much more challenging.

She managed one step before she froze in her tracks. Utter surprise both on her face and voice. "Mike?"

He had never been very fond of that name. Tren and his late brother had been the only people he had ever tolerated calling him that.

"Jana, welcome. You look great," he said, already admonishing himself for his own words.

"This is your ship?" she said, still not moving.

He smiled, trying to defuse the increasing tension. "Hard to believe, I know."

Tren didn't speak. Her black eyes simply stared at him. For a moment he feared she would simply turn around and demand to be beamed back to the starbase.

Chow cleared his throat. "I hate to interrupt the happy reunion," he said with a growing smirk. "But I still have three hundred tons of cargo to beam over and time is not on our side."

Owens turned to the Chinese man behind the controls. Deep down he couldn't deny the impulse to want to rip off the noncoms large bald head for that comment.

Tren stepped off the platform. "Yes, of course," she said, sounding far more graceful than his thoughts had been. "Please, go ahead."

When Owens turned to face her again, she stood just centimeters away. He immediately noticed that she had changed fragrances. He wanted to say something but his mind would not come up with any words that seemed appropriate.

Tren made the decision for him. She reached out and gave him a surprisingly tight embrace. "Mike," she nearly whispered. "It's so good to see you again."

"It's been a while," he said cautiously as they separated again. "How have you been?"

"Well," she said and took her time to look him over from top to bottom. "And you. Finally made, captain, huh? I'm glad for you. It's what you always wanted," she added.

He couldn't be entirely sure but he thought he noticed the slightest hint of malice in her tone. Perhaps it was something else.

"I see you decided to give up on Starfleet."

The transporter whirled back to life, beaming additional cargo and personnel onboard.

"I realized a long time ago that there are other ways to serve the Federation than by being in Starfleet."

Owens nodded slowly even though he did not know what she was referring to. He didn't have the slightest idea who she worked for and why she was on board but for the moment he didn't care. He focused on her voice, her faint smile, her pleasant smell, and her powerful eyes. All the things he had been so much in love with once.

He hardly even noticed the crewmen swarming into the room, past him and Tren, beginning to haul the cargo off the transporter dais. It seemed as if the world around him did no longer exist. His mind was being flooded by the memories he had shared with her. They were good memories.

"But enough about me," she said, focusing him back into the present. "You look remarkably well yourself. The years have been good to you."

"A proper diet and regular exercise can do wonders."

One of the crewmen nearly collided with Owens as he tried to get a heavy crate past him. "Sorry, sir," he said and hastily walked by him.

"Not a great place for a reunion," he said. "Let me show you to your quarters."

Tren nodded and let him lead her out of the transporter room.

\* \* \*

"We are receiving a message from the starbase," said Lieutenant Trinik from the tactical station.

Deen, sitting at her usual post at operations, turned to see if perhaps a more senior officer had returned to the bridge but found none. She did not relish being in command, but as a senior officer, this task occasionally fell to her. She hadn't expected to have to play captain while at the starbase and had opted to stay at operations instead of taking the center seat.

She stood, took a couple of steps toward the command area, and then faced the main view screen. "Put it on, please."

The screen shifted to show a middle-aged admiral, sitting behind his desk. A flag with the Starfleet emblem and one with the Federation seal adorned the wall directly behind him. The admiral had long black hair and a full face. Deen figured him of Native American descent.

"This is DeMara Deen, presently in command of *Eagle*. How can we be of assistance, sir?"

A small smile crept onto the admiral's lips upon seeing Deen. "Admiral Wambleeska here. According to my records are expecting to take on board three hundred mission specialists. Is that correct?"

She nodded. "I believe it is. Is there a problem, sir?"

Wambleeska's expression hardened. "I'm afraid the shipment will not arrive in time and you will have to proceed with your mission without them."

Deen felt somewhat irritated by Wambleeska's instance to call three hundred people a shipment but decided to keep those feelings to herself. "I will relay your message to Captain Owens. May I ask what the nature of the problem is, Admiral?"

"It appears we have lost contact with the vessel transporting the shipment. We received a distress signal indicating an attack in the Celes Sector shortly before we lost all communications."

She took a step closer to the screen. "If you provide us with the last known coordinates we could mount a search and rescue mission immediately."

Wambleeska shook his head. "That won't be possible, I'm afraid. Your orders are quite clear and allow for zero flexibility."

"Are you launching other ships?"

"We have no other operational ships in the vicinity. A search and rescue mission has been assigned to the Starbase 49."

Lif Culsten looked up from his station. "How about the *Sovereign*, sir?"

Wambleeska uttered a sarcastic laugh. "The *Sovereign* wouldn't go anywhere if we tractored her all the way out there."

"I do not understand," said Deen.

"The *Sovereign* has been having problems from the day she came out of the shipyard. She's been bogged down by system bugs and random malfunctions ever since," he said. "They call her a lemon. Her sister ship has been in operation for two years and performed admirably," he added more to himself than anybody else. "Very strange."

Deen was in no mood to contemplate the design problems of Starfleet's pride and joy. Lives were on the line. "How quickly can Starbase 49 get a ship out there?"

Wambleeska grimaced, clearly not appreciating being interrogated by a junior officer. "I've been advised that the Caledonia is due to arrive here in two days to spearhead search and rescue operations."

"Two days. Sir, with all due respect, we are ready now. I cannot believe that this mission is important enough to possibly sentence all these -"

"Your orders stand, Ensign, and I'm not required to justify them to you. Inform your captain that your departure remains on schedule. Wambleeska out," he said sharply and then disappeared from the viewscreen.

Deen was upset and not because Wambleeska had gotten her rank wrong. It was a common mistake after all there weren't many twenty-three-year-old full lieutenants in Starfleet.

"If you were holding out for that quick promotion, I think you may have just kissed it goodbye," Culsten said.

"I don't care about promotions," she said. "You're the ambitious one, remember?" she said and sat in the center chair. "Perhaps we should switch. See how you like the heavy burdens of command."

He smiled. "You know what? I really enjoyed the way you handled the admiral. I didn't know you could be this stubborn."

She sighed. "Didn't do me much good, did it?"

"Well, I'm sure he won't forget you for a while."

She nodded absentmindedly. It was probably true. But people forgetting her had never been one of her problems. Her physical appearance and her attractive aura made her stand out and people tended to remember those who stood out. It was not always a blessing and in this particular instance, she wished she would be remembered as the person

who had convinced the admiral to launch an immediate rescue mission. Instead, all that Wambleeska would remember from their short encounter was her blatant defiance.

Her eyes caught the sleek and aesthetic lines of the *Sovereign* on the viewscreen. She could not help but notice the all-too-obvious irony. A striking exterior and yet utterly useless. She thought she could emphasize.

\* \* \*

Owens led her into one of the spacious VIP quarters on deck eight.

"I hope this will be to your satisfaction," he said when she had stepped inside. "My quarters are just a few doors down if you need anything."

Tren took a quick tour of the quarters and then turned back to him with a smile on her lips. "You say your quarters are close by?"

"Coincidence."

"Of course."

"I'll have somebody fetch your belongings and bring them to you."

"Thanks."

He stepped to the computer alcove embedded in the wall. "This can get you anything you need. All you have to do is—"

"Mike."

He turned to face her. "I know how to work the replicator."

He nodded. "Can I ask you something?"

She gestured for him to go ahead.

"You looked so surprised when you came onboard. You didn't know that I was on *Eagle*?"

She shook her head slightly as she stepped closer. "Believe it or not, I didn't bother to check crew complements. I asked for a fast ship with a reliable crew and they gave me you."

"I see."

"You wonder if I would have declined if I knew you were here."

He wasn't sure if he wanted to know the answer to that question. "It's just such a strange coincidence."

"You know I don't—"

"Believe in coincidences," he said. "Yes, I remember that."

She smiled. "I wonder what else you remember."

Owens didn't miss how close they suddenly stood to each other. He stepped around her to sit in one of the chairs. "Eighteen years is a long time, Jan."

She turned around and he thought he could spot something in her eyes. Disappointment, perhaps? "Are you saying you didn't think about me all that time? Not even once?" she said in a tone filled with mock sincerity.

"Of course, I've been thinking about you."

"Well, you have a funny way of showing it," she said her voice now lacking any humor. "Eighteen years and you haven't even bothered trying to get in touch with me once."

He didn't know how to reply to that. She was right of course. They had lost touch after they had broken up and he had made no effort to reconnect. He had been too preoccupied, focused entirely on his skyrocketing career.

"What about you? I don't recall you sending me any postcards either."

Her facial features hardened. "You've got to be kidding me? You broke up with me, remember? You left me."

"It's not like you gave me a choice in the matter. And when the *Fearless* left Federation space, we were out of comm range for four years."

"You didn't have to go on the *Fearless*. You could have accepted a position on Jupiter Station but that wasn't good enough for you, was it?"

He could feel his anger rising despite himself. He stood to be on equal footing. "You suggested that I wouldn't be happy on Jupiter Station. I remember it like yesterday, Jana. You wanted me to take the starship assignment."

"I can't believe you. You haven't changed one iota, have you?" she said, raising her voice. "I told you what I thought you wanted to hear. I cared for you and I held out a tiny hope that maybe you cared more for me than you did for your career. But you were so focused on seeking fame and adventure out in the galaxy, you were oblivious to everything else around you, including me."

"That's nonsense and you know it," he shot back. "I was willing to come back to you if only you had been willing to wait for me. You never showed any interest in working things out. You didn't fight for us, Jan."

She took two steps toward him. "You're such a self-absorbed chump, you know that? It wasn't my place to fight for us. You should have fought for me."

Owens uttered a sarcastic laugh. "Yeah, who's self-absorbed?"

"Shut up," she said, reached out for him, and pressed her lips hard against his.

He was caught completely off guard but any resistance melted away within a split second and he allowed her to take the lead.

Moments later his uniform jacket was on the floor and Tren was working on opening the crimson-colored shirt he wore underneath.

"This is not exactly what I expected," he said

"It's what you hoped for." She nearly ripped the shirt off his body and pushed him toward the bedroom.

"I wouldn't say that."

"Liar," she added with a vicious smile and dropped him onto the bed.

"I thought it was morally apprehensive for a Betazoid to read somebody's mind without their permission."

She removed the top of her suit. "Which part of this situation makes you think I'm bound by moral restrictions?"

"Good point," he said as she hiked up her skirt and sat on his legs. "I take it you're not married then?"

She laughed out loud and leaned down to kiss him again.

"You know," he managed to say. "I always thought that I had perfected my technique of shielding my thoughts."

Tren moved down his body and began to tug at his pants. She looked up. "Your technique has always been lousy."

"Oh?"

"Lieutenant Commander Xylion to Captain Owens."

"Ignore it," she said as she tried to pull down his trousers.

"I really need to get that."

Tren got frustrated with working the pants and slid back up to get in more kisses. "No, you don't," she said and slipped her tongue back into his mouth.

"Captain Owens, do you read?"

Owens moved his hands on her bare waist and with a quick, strong heave, flipped her off of him and onto her back. Tren yelped with surprise.

He looked down at her with a satisfied smirk on his face.

"You always did prefer being on top."

He lowered himself to kiss her.

"Captain, please respond."

He withdrew causing Tren to scowl at him angrily. She sighed. "He sure is tenacious."

"You have no idea," he said and then looked up at the ceiling. "This is Owens, go ahead."

"Sir, the embarkation is now complete and we are ready to depart," he said, his voice not betraying any irritation due to the delay.

She had slipped out from underneath him and moved behind his back instead. She put her arm around his neck pulling him toward her, and then started nibbling his ear.

"Stop that, you know I don't like it."

"I'm sorry sir, I am unclear as to what you are referring to."

"Hold on, Commander," he said and tried to free himself from her embrace. "Let me go."

"You know you want me."

"Not right now."

"Sir, are you all right, do you require assistance?"

She laughed. "He might."

"No." Owens barked. "Inform the bridge, get permission for departure, and get us underway. Owens out." His words were practically flying out of his mouth to terminate the connection as swiftly as possible.

As soon as the comms link was closed, she managed to press him down onto the bed again. "Now, where were we?"

"I think I had you pinned."

"Really?" she said and shifted all her weight to keep him in place. She moved back in to kiss him but she froze just a few before she met his lips.

"What's wrong?"

She sat back up. "Did you say we're leaving?"

"Yes, we loaded all the cargo and are ready to get underway to the Ligos system."

She looked straight into his eyes. "We can't leave," she said and jumped off the bed. She grabbed the top part of her suit, slipped it on, and headed straight for the exit.

He crawled off the bed. "Wait, don't tell me you get space sick."

He sighed when he heard the doors slide open and then shut again. "Great," he said, "that went really well." He reached for his clothes and scrambled after her. He didn't find time to properly adjust his uniform and ran after her still fidgeting with the zipper of his jacket.

He didn't pay attention as he stormed onto the corridor and promptly ran right into a crewman carrying a box. The small crate fell out of the other man's hands and landed on the floor.

Owens looked down at the phasers by the crewman's feet. He then looked up.

The Tellarite seemed annoyed until he noticed that he had collided with the captain. "I'm sorry, sir."

Owens was suddenly very conscious of the fact that he was still trying to adjust his uniform and that seconds earlier, the same crewman he had collided with may very well have witnessed the half-dressed Tren coming out of the very same quarters.

A suspicious look crossed the Tellarite's features.

"It was my fault, crewman," Owens said. "And it's not what you think," he added quickly but then decided that he did not have the time to explain himself. Without another word, he followed her down the corridor.

He caught up with her just as she was about to enter the turbo-lift.

"You know you just single-handedly destroyed my reputation on this ship," he said and finished zipping up his jacket.

But Tren, who had already readjusted her clothes, seemed to be too preoccupied with her thoughts to pay attention to him. "Bridge."

The lift set in motion instantly.

"Are you going to tell me what this is all about?"

"We have to stop the ship."

Owens did his best to straighten his hair and jacket, trying to avoid anyone else on board drawing the wrong conclusion. Or even the right ones, for that matter.

The lift stopped and the doors opened. She stepped out and he was just one step behind her.

The viewscreen gave proof of the ship's departure, displaying the quickly approaching and fully opened space doors of the starbase.

Tren headed straight for the center of the bridge and found Deen standing from the command chair as soon as she spotted them.

"We have to turn around, now."

Deen looked at her with puzzlement and then turned to Owens. "Sir?"

"Dee, meet Agent Jana Tren," he said slightly out of breath, and then considered the Betazoid. "Jana, this is Lieutenant DeMara Deen. She works for me. I'm the captain. Which means if you want to turn around, you should probably start by talking to me."

"I'm sorry Mike but we have to turn the ship around. We have to take my people aboard. We cannot leave without them."

"Excuse me," Ddeen said. "Are you referring to the mission specialists?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but it appears that their ship has been attacked. Starfleet lost contact," she said and looked at Owens. "I haven't had a chance to let you know yet."

Tren silently sat in the seat next to the command chair, seemingly stunned by the news.

"Do we have their last known coordinates?"

Deen shook her head. "We can't go after them. Admiral Wambleeska made it very clear that we're to proceed with our mission with no delay."

"But that doesn't make any sense," Owens said.

"It makes perfect sense," Tren said and looked up.

"Those are your men out there how can you say that?" Deen said

"Don't you think I know that?"

Owens could not remember ever having seen Jana Tren filled with that much anger before. Granted, they had been together for only four years. He had met her in San Francisco during his first year at the Academy and two years before she had joined. But in all that time she had always been a steadfast idealist, someone who had the highest regard for life in all its forms. Eighteen years was more than enough time to turn idealism into strict pragmatism, he realized.

"We are now clearing the starbase," Culsten said from the helm.

Owens turned to look at the viewscreen that now showed nothing but the void of space. He glanced back at Tren. "It's your mission. Your call."

She did not even take time to contemplate. "We go ahead without them."

It was not the answer he had hoped for but he gave her a curt nod nevertheless. "Dee, set a course for the Ligos system and engage at maximum warp as soon as we have reached the outer marker."

She nodded.

"Agent Tren, may I speak with you in my ready room?"

Tren stood and followed him into his adjacent office.

As soon as they had left the bridge Culsten swiveled his chair around. "What do you think their story is?"

"I don't know," said Deen, her eyes still fixed on the doors to the ready room as if she could see right through the solid panels.

"You're the captain's closest friend and you don't know about her?"

Her eyes took a moment to find Culsten. "It might be hard to believe, Lif, but the captain had a life before I met him."

He nodded. "You're right. That is hard to believe," he said and turned back to his console.

Deen was well aware that Owens had had relationships in the past she didn't know about. Over a year ago she had found out that he had been romantically involved with Amaya Donners when they had been at the Academy together.

Something had gone very wrong between them, however, creating an animosity that had lasted for years. That had changed suddenly when they had traveled back in time and Owens had managed to change the past somehow.

But she had never heard of Jana Tren. Owens had never confided in her about the women he had known in his past and of course, there was nothing to say that he had to.

And yet she couldn't help wondering how she felt about any of it.

\* \* \*

"Take a seat," Owens said and then stepped right up to the replicator. "Tonic water and a *raktajino*, hot."

The machine immediately came to life and produced the requested beverages. Owens took the tall glass and mug and placed them on his desk; the Klingon coffee in front of the now-sitting Tren.

She looked at the mug and then at him. "I don't drink *raktatjino*."

"Since when?"

Tren was about to respond when he cut her off. "Never mind. You want something else?"

She shook her head.

He sat down in his chair, opposite Tren. "Talk to me, Jan, what's this all about?"

"I'm afraid the details of this mission are strictly need-to-know," she said in what sounded like a well-rehearsed line.

"You're using my ship. I think I deserve to know what my crew is in for here."

"All I can say is that this mission is vital to Federation interests and that should be enough for you to do your job."

"I'll do my job no matter what. What I'm asking is for you to put a little trust in me."

She looked him right in the eye as she considered his request. "I'm sorry, Mike but I cannot do that. Believe me, it's better that way."

"I'm sick entirely of people asking me to hand over my ship and the lives of my crew and then claiming that the less I know the better for everyone. Doesn't anybody ever think that the more knowledge I have about what I might be facing the greater the chances for success?"

She matched his confrontational tone. "Your mission is pretty simple. Just get the damn cargo to the Epsilon Twelve outpost and you're done. What else do you need to know?"

He uttered a sarcastic laugh. It was always pretty simple up to the point where everything went wrong. "You could start by telling me what you're doing on Epsilon Twelve and why you need three hundred men to do it."

She jumped to her feet. "I cannot reveal that information. In case you hadn't noticed, there's a war going on and the enemy has ears everywhere."

"Trust me I had noticed," he said, unable to mask his irritation over her condescending manner. Chances were that he had seen more combat

since the war had started than she had in her entire lifetime. "If you don't believe me, why don't you bother looking up our casualty reports?"

She shook her head in disbelief. "You think you're the only one who's been suffering? You think you're the only one who had to make tough decisions?" she seemed to catch herself then, her tone becoming steadier as she continued. "You have no idea the kind of decisions I had to ponder, how they could affect the lives of thousands."

He didn't miss the hardness in her eyes. She had always possessed a remarkable intensity but this was like nothing he had seen in her before. She had seen things, done things that he could not even begin to imagine. There was no other way to explain her astonishing transformation. He knew that the Jana Tren he had loved was still there somewhere. He had seen her just a few minutes earlier in her quarters. But now that part of her personality was entirely overshadowed by something much darker.

Owens was not, could not, give up on this. "I want to know why I risk the lives of my crew on a cargo mission," he said albeit in a much softer tone now. "If we should have losses, I want to be able to tell their families what they died for."

"Ensuring the survival of the Federation," she said without missing a beat. "You can tell them that and nothing would be closer to the truth." She continued before he could object further. "We all have our orders, Captain. You, me, everyone, and that cannot be changed. You can ask me all you want but I cannot tell you more than I have. So do us both a favor and stop wasting your breath," she said, turned, and without uttering another word left the ready room.

Owens maintained his calm demeanor for about five seconds after Tren had left.

Then he angrily struck out, wiping his computer clean off his desk. It went flying through the room, impacting loudly against the far bulkhead and then breaking into two pieces before it landed on the floor.

Owens didn't even pay attention to the damage he had done as he sat back down in his chair. He wasn't quite sure what he was angrier at. The fact that Tren had been so completely uncooperative or that he had just managed to destroy any chance he might have had to get back together with the woman he now knew for certain he was still in love with.

Moments later the sound of the door chime took his thoughts off the subject.

"Come."

The door panels parted and Deen carefully peeked her head inside before she came in. "Are you all right?"

"Never better."

"It sounded as if something—" she stopped herself when she spotted the victim of his outburst on the floor. "Now I know that didn't just happen to fall off your desk."

He looked at it for the first time. "I honestly don't know how that happened."

She walked over to pick up the pieces. "I take it you don't want to talk about it."

He said nothing.

"That's what I thought," she said, put the broken computer on his desk, and headed back for the exit.

"You usually don't give up this easily."

She stopped and turned. "And you usually don't express yourself quite this forcefully."

He managed a small smile. "Perhaps a smooth drink down in the Nest might calm my clearly aggravated nerves."

She nodded. "But only if you promise you won't smash anything else."

He got up from his chair and walked her to the exit. "I'll try but they do have a lot of fragile things they keep down there."

## V – CONFLICT

Lif Culsten had volunteered to head the night shift. It had been the first time that his request to be in charge of *Eagle* during the least busy time of the day had been granted. He'd had his eye on the position for a long time but the outbreak of the war had made Edison decide to put more experienced command officers in the center seat even at night.

This usually meant either Edison himself, Xylion, or Leva. However, the first officer had taken the night off, the Vulcan was still busy managing the cargo *Eagle* had recently taken on board, and Leva – Culsten wasn't sure exactly why the half-Romulan had not been chosen.

What he did know was that *Eagle*'s tactical officer had very recently fallen out of grace with Edison due to his curious behavior. Culsten had that Leva was not the only one acting out of character as of late.

DeMara Deen had been much more irritable than usual which was especially strange as the blithe Tenarian was not easily rattled. The captain did not seem to be immune from the mood shifts coursing their way through the ship. A few hours earlier he and the rest of the bridge crew had been unable to ignore the piercing voices coming from the captain's ready room that ultimately resulted in Agent Tren's sudden departure followed by the sound of a loud crash. Deen had gone to investigate and then both she and the captain had left together.

It was all too obvious that the war was tearing at everybody's nerves but he had not expected that the sturdy Romulan and the usually cool-headed captain would be the first victims of the relentless stress.

Culsten leaned back in the command chair, enjoying the feel of the pristine leather and the comfort of the soft cushions. He quickly decided that he liked sitting there. He had little difficulty imagining that this was

exactly where he belonged. One day a chair just like it would be his. In the meantime, he had plenty of time to practice for his big day.

"Status report. All stations."

Lance Stanmore uttered a sigh. "Operations: All systems normal."

Culsten acknowledged his report with a curt nod.

"Helm: All systems normal. Still running level three diagnostic on ventral navigational sensors."

"Tactical reports all system within standard parameters," said Trinik from his station immediately behind the captain's chair after Ensign Srena had made her report.

"Very good," Culsten said.

Srena, the Andorian helm officer turned to look at the acting captain. "Is it at all possible that you are bored?"

He gave the young blue-skinned officer a stern look. Srena ch'Trenmvec was new to the ship. She had barely graduated from the Academy and had been quickly posted to *Eagle*. Personnel shortages had forced Starfleet to turn cadets into officers before they had formally graduated, unceremoniously throwing them right into the deep end. They had to learn quickly and Culsten thought that so far the nimble Andorian had done a decent job. It was, of course, his responsibility to make sure that she was doing it right.

"I'm keeping you on your toes, Ensign. And you should be thankful for that. If there is one thing we cannot afford at the moment it's complacency."

Srena gave him a serious nod and turned back to her station.

Stanmore couldn't suppress a chuckle. "That was a nice speech. I bet you rehearsed it before coming on duty today," he said, throwing Srena a large smile.

Culsten tried to maintain a stoic expression but ultimately failed when a smile broke his lips.

Srena looked back at him. "For a moment I actually thought that you knew what you're doing in that chair."

Culsten stood. "I know exactly what I'm doing. My only mistake was to recommend you for the helm position," he said with a vicious grin on his lips.

"We both know the only reason you don't want me here is because you know how good I am and you're worried that the captain may decide to replace you all together."

Ever since Srena had come aboard the two had engaged in a rivalry of sorts as to who was a better pilot. Culsten had found that it had helped alleviate much of the tension the much too young officer had felt over helming a starship during a war. He couldn't deny that she was good. Perhaps even better than he had been when he had first started in that position.

"I'm beginning to think that there might be something to that," Stanmore said. "Did you notice how uncomfortable he gets every time you take his post?"

She nodded quickly. "Exactly."

"Lance, I thought you were on my side on this?"

The blonde-haired operations manager shrugged his shoulders. Stanmore was an easy-going kind of guy, hailing from Southern California on Earth and very much representing the lifestyle of the sunny coastal

region. There wasn't much the man took too seriously and yet he was a professional when he had to be. "Just calling it how I see it."

Culsten was about to respond when a warning sound from the helm stopped him in his tracks. It took all his willpower not to jump next to Srena to check the readouts himself.

"Level three diagnostic completed," Srena said with a grimace on her face as she looked over the results. Something was clearly amiss.

He noticed. "What is it?"

"I'm not entirely sure. There seems to be a malfunction with the aft sensor array. A point seven eight variance in the pattern recognition subsystem."

"Point seven eight," Stanmore said. "That doesn't sound too bad. Could be a sensor echo."

Culsten tended to agree with the operations manager except that he knew that *Eagle's* navigational sensors had never experienced a variance higher than point five percent. "Does anyone have a sensor contact?"

There was a momentary silence as all three stations around him checked their instruments.

Trinik was first to respond. "Negative contacts within sensor range."

"I don't have anything either," said Stanmore.

He took a step toward Srena who had not answered. "Helm?"

She shook her head. "I think I read a minimal special distortion bearing one-eight-seven mark one-five. Distance approximately three hundred fifty-five million kilometers."

"That is well outside primary sensor range," said Stanmore.

Culsten now stood almost right next to Srena, quite tempted to push her out of her seat and reclaim his station. "Transfer your findings to the aft science station," he said and turned to head for the back of the bridge.

"There he goes having to show off again," Stanmore said with a smirk.

But he couldn't really make heads or tails of the readings the science station provided him. There was no immediate reason to believe that the tiny distortion they had detected was not due to a misalignment of the sensor grid.

The doors to the turbo-lift opened and Deen strode onto the bridge.

"What are you doing up here so late?" he asked her as she headed his way.

"Just thought I finish up a few reports."

"Well now that you're here maybe you wouldn't mind having a look at this," he said and pointed at the science station. "We just discovered this a minute ago."

She stepped next to him and carefully scrutinized the screen. "Looks like a sensor echo."

"You think so?"

She moved closer to the station and began entering a few commands. "It could be some kind of spatial anomaly."

He shook his head. "We're at warp eight point five. There aren't many natural phenomena that can travel this fast."

She looked at him as if he had just answered his own question.

"It's a ship," he said slowly.

"There is really no way of telling at this distance. It could be a sensor echo or it could be a malfunction."

"What do we do?"

"We?" she said with a smile.

"You're the ranking officer here."

"Oh no," she said quickly. "I just came up here to catch up with some work. You're the one in charge. You have to make a decision."

Culsten tried to think it through. "If it's a ship I should call the captain."

"He's sleeping," she said. "And I'm sure he'd be in a very bad mood if you'd call him all the way up here to discuss a sensor echo."

He nodded, acceding to her point. "Okay, so let's say that it isn't a sensor echo but an enemy starship and I do nothing."

"You'll endanger the lives of everybody on this ship."

He uttered a heavy sigh.

"See why I'm not eager for command?"

Culsten wasn't listening. Instead, he turned back to the view screen which at the moment showed nothing but the stars streaking past the ship. And then an idea crossed his mind. An idea only a helmsman could come up with. Or so he liked to think.

He stepped up to the tactical console, standing right next to Trinik. His eyes remained trained forward. "Srena, stand by for an emergency deceleration to warp six."

"Huh?"

But Culsten had already moved on. "Lance, transfer all available power to the internal dampening field."

Stanmore nodded and went straight to work.

Deen smiled as she seemed to understand what he had in mind.

"IDF at one hundred thirty percent," Stanmore said. "Nobody onboard is going to feel a thing," he added, also realizing what he was up to.

Culsten nodded. "Srena, drop us to warp six as quickly as possible."

"Decelerating."

As expected, there was practically no sensation as the ship hit the brakes. On the viewscreen, the streaking star field adjusted so quickly that an untrained eye would not have noticed.

An alert signal chimed out from the tactical station. "Sensor contact," the Trinik said. "Bearing one-eight-seven mark one-seven. Distance three hundred fifty-one million kilometers."

"I'm reading it, too," Stanmore said. "It definitely has mass and speed. Wait..." he checked his readouts again. "It's gone."

"Something is following us," said Srena, her short antennas on top of her head twitching excitedly.

Culsten turned to face Deen, a satisfied grin on his lips.

"I guess now you better start calling everybody."

He nodded. "Yellow Alert. Lieutenant Culsten to Captain Owens, please report to the bridge."

\* \* \*

*Eagle's* senior officers had assembled on the bridge no ten minutes after Culsten had called out the yellow alert.

DeMara Deen and the Lif Culsten had taken their respective stations at the front of the bridge, Commander Xylion was at the science station and Michael Owens, Gene Edison, and Jana Tren stood close behind him while he attempted to analyze the pursuing vessel.

"Whoever they are," Edison said. "They seem to be quite determined to stay undetected."

"Any chance of identifying the ship?" said Owens

"I believe we are being followed by two vessels," Xylion said while his fingers raced over the control console. "I detect two warp signatures. Both vessels are utilizing a modified energy shield to mask their presence."

"A cloaking device?" said Tren.

"Not in the conventional sense," Xylion said. "This one appears to be designed to deflect direct sensor scans. It is not as efficient as a full cloaking device."

"Efficient enough," said Edison. "They've been following us undetected for who knows how long. But I guess we can rule out Romulans or Klingons."

D'Karr who stood close by observing the officers, nodded. "If we were being followed by my people, we would not have been able to detect them."

"Whoever they are, I believe it is safe to assume that their unconventional shielding device is consuming a great amount of energy,"

said Xylion. "Considering that they are traveling at such high speeds, I find it unlikely that they are prepared for an attack."

Owens nodded. "They're just shadowing us. Perhaps trying to figure out where we are going," he said and looked at Tren.

"I don't believe it," Tren said under her breath.

Edison turned to the captain. "In any case, we shouldn't take any risks. If we divert course we could head to the Prellus system. A detour that shouldn't cost us more than a day or two."

"And lead them right into the waiting arms of the Eighth Fleet," the captain said with a smile. "It would be a splendid little trap," he added and headed back for his chair at the center, closely followed by Tren and Edison.

"We cannot afford to change course," Tren said as they stepped into the command area.

"What do you suggest we do?" Edison said.

He had met Jana Tren for the first time just a few minutes earlier. It hadn't been enough time to get to know her but he had found her instantly unsympathetic. She had made an entirely cold and professional impression and seemed to make an effort to maintain a calculated detachment to *Eagle*'s crew. Everybody except the captain that was. It wasn't difficult to guess that the two had a history. How far back it went and how close they had been, however, he didn't know. What he did know was that she was a Betazoid and that made him very careful with his thoughts.

"We don't have a choice," she said. "We need to engage them."

Edison shook his head. "That is not a good idea. We're still licking our wounds from our last encounter with the Jem'Hadar. We can easily avoid risking lives and damage if we head for Prellus."

"I'm afraid this is not a matter of convenience, Commander," she said coldly. "We have to act and we have to act now," she turned to the captain. "This is our only option."

Owens looked at her for a moment and then turned away, noticing for the first time that Leva was not at his post. A clear breach of protocol during a Yellow Alert. "Mister D'Karr, could you give us a hand at tactical?"

"Of course," the Klingon said promptly and stepped up to the offensive controls, standing ready to assist Lieutenant Trinik.

Owens sat in his chair. "Red Alert."

The alarm klaxons began blaring throughout the ship without delay, bracing the crew for impending danger.

Tren sat in the chair next to him.

Edison remained on his feet, trying hard to force a frown off his face.

"Helm, bring us about," the captain said.

Culsten responded and began to turn the ship.

On the viewscreen, the starscape was noticeably changing as the ship executed a hard course correction.

"Two Jem'Hadar attack ships detected. Dead ahead, three hundred fifty million kilometers and closing," said Lieutenant DeMara Deen.

"Our mystery guests have just become a lot less mysterious," said Culsten.

Owens leaned forward in his chair slightly. "What's their status, Dee?"

"Holding course and speed," she said. "We'll be in weapon's range within two minutes."

Edison glanced over to his left to see the determined expression on the captain's face. Next to him sat Jana Tren, her eyes seemingly equally focused on what she had forced Owens to do. But there seemed to be something else there as well. A tad of insecurity perhaps? He couldn't be certain. She looked his way as though she had picked up on his thoughts. He quickly turned away.

"We're now in visual range," said Deen.

"On screen," he said.

The viewscreen showed the two bug-shaped starships heading straight for *Eagle*. Both ships were still thousands of kilometers out but the image on the screen made it appear as if they were a mere stone's throw away, ready to pounce on *Eagle* at any second.

"They're on a direct collision course," said Culsten with unmistakable tension in his voice.

Tren leaned closer to the captain. "The Jem'Hadar are prone to make suicide runs."

"I'm aware," he said, no doubt recalling the painful memory of seeing a Jem'Hadar ship smashing into *Agamemnon* days earlier.

And yet the captain remained calmly dedicated to their current approach, showing no signs that he planned to change the ship's heading. Tren focused on his profile, as though trying to get a glimpse of what was happening in the man's head. Edison thought that whatever she was picking up from him did not help put her mind at ease.

In the meantime, So'Dan Leva had entered the bridge. He had quietly proceeded to his station, relieving Trinik, and with all but an icy look had

made D'Karr relinquish the tactical console as well. "Their weapons and shields are fully charged," he said.

Neither Owens nor Edison had the time to take special note of the Romulan's sudden arrival.

Owens' eyes never left the viewscreen. "Mister Culsten, what is the distance between those two ships?"

"Less than eight-hundred meters."

Edison looked at the captain with a growing suspicion of what he had in mind. "That is *not* a lot of space," he said, knowing well that *Eagle* was about four-hundred and forty meters wide.

A small smile crept onto Owens' lips and Edison knew instantly that his suspicions had been right and faced the helm station. "Lif, you think you can pull off a Hammer-Drill?"

Culsten looked down at his instruments and then back at the first officer. "It's going to be tight."

Owens nodded. "Do it."

"Aye, aye, sir," he said and returned his full attention to his station. He was going to need it. "Everybody better find something to hang on to."

"What's a Hammer-Drill?" Tren said.

"You'll see."

Edison headed up the ramp to the tactical station. "Commander, we need full power to forward shields and get ready to transfer power distribution at a moment's notice."

Leva nodded.

"Distance to target: five-million kilometers, four-point-five-million kilometers, four-million," Deen reported. "Now, three-point-five million, three-million kilometers. We are entering secondary weapon's range."

"Mister Leva, fire torpedoes, both targets, full spread," Owens said.

Without delay *Eagle* began firing bright blue quantum torpedoes at a rapid pace. Each projectile was catapulted out of the launcher heading straight for one of the two Jem'Hadar vessels, ten in total, five for each.

The attacking ships barely even attempted to avoid the incoming fire. Multiple impacts on both ships significantly weakened their shields but they remained on course.

"Drop to impulse," Owens said. "Initiate Hammer-Drill Maneuver."

This was Culsten's cue. A few button presses later *Eagle* had dropped out of warp and the ship began to spin on its z-axis. While the internal dampeners and the artificial gravity countermanded the effects of the ship's sudden roll, the main viewscreen now had the enemy ships spinning.

Tren had to turn her eyes away from the screen, probably beginning to experience a sense of motion sickness.

"The Jem'Hadar have dropped out of warp."

"They're opening fire," Leva said.

But Gne knew that there wasn't much they could do about that. The maneuver Owens had chosen required *Eagle* to maintain its present course no matter what.

"Steady as she goes," the captain said.

The constantly moving Federation starship offered very little surface for the supercharged Jem'Hadar polaron beams to connect with. Many

simply zipped harmlessly past *Eagle*; some graced the perimeter of the shields while a few found their target.

"Shields holding at eighty-eight percent," Leva said from tactical, holding on to his station as the bridge shook from the impacts.

"Distance now five-hundred-thousand kilometers and closing."

Culsten began to slowly shake his head and Edison realized why. The two ships on the screen were moving closer to each other, closing the gap between them.

Geen noticed it too and he shot the captain a worried look.

"Three-hundred-thousand kilometers," said Deen. "Primary weapon's range."

"Fire phasers," said Edison without hesitation.

Again the Jem'Hadar seemed unconcerned, not attempting to avoid the phased energy discharges emanating from the Starfleet vessel.

"Multiple hits. The starboard vessel's shields are buckling," Leva said.

But Owens' focus remained on the screen. "Mister Culsten?"

"I don't know," he said, his voice revealing a hint of insecurity. "Not much room."

"Yes or no?" the captain said.

It took the young helmsman a second to answer. But when he did his voice was firm as steel. "We can make it."

"Dee?"

"They're not changing course. Eighty thousand kilometers now."

"They're either playing chicken..." Edison said.

"Or they're on a one-way trip," finished Deen without taking her eyes off her instruments.

Geme looked back at both the captain and Tren. Owens was still determined to follow through with the current course of action. For some reason, he seemed to doubt that these particular Jem'Hadar had any intention of dying for their Founders just yet. Tren's eyes, however, darted back and forth as if everybody around her had lost their minds. The steadily closing enemy ships were a clear sign to her that they meant business and she couldn't believe the serenity that had ensued on *Eagle*'s bridge in light of the impending collision.

Edison suppressed a smirk. He took some delight in the seemingly stiff agent's distress. He understood now that her cold demeanor was mostly a mask she had put on to fool those around her. Or perhaps it was some form of protection she had learned to apply over her years in whatever dealings she had been involved with. He had no time to give the matter too much thought, however. *Eagle* was about to undertake one of the most dangerous combat maneuvers in the books.

*Eagle*'s bridge shuddered as both Jem'Hadar vessels had now intensified their firing rate as if angry at the Starfleet ship's insistence not to veer off.

"Shields at seventy-five percent," Leva said, his voice just slightly less confident than just moments before.

The spinning *Eagle* continued to shoot toward the Jem'Hadar, her nose pointed straight at the seemingly tiny, and closing gap between the two ships.

"Fifty-thousand kilometers, forty-thousand, thirty, twenty, ten-thousand kilometers."

"Mister Leva, concentrate all phaser fire on the port nacelle of the starboard vessel," Owens said.

The concentrated barrage that followed was dead on target. The shields already weakened before gave in and the phaser blasts tore through the enemy vessel's warp nacelle and pushed the ship away from its companion. The gap was widening.

"Do it, Lieutenant," Owens said, directing his attention to the helmsman.

Culsten's superior Kellonian reflexes came in handy now as he manipulated his controls at lightning-fast speeds.

*Eagle* - still spinning - was about to smash right into oncoming traffic. The few thousand meters between them were melting away in seconds, bringing them ever closer to certain catastrophe. Then, just moments before the inevitable, the Federation ship froze on its z-axis, stopping all rotary motion as it was almost completely vertically aligned.

The enemy ships now filled out the entirety of the viewscreen causing Jana Tren to grip the armrests of her chair with so much force that her knuckles began turning white.

The bridge crew collectively held its breath as they realized what would happen next.

"Drop shields," Edison said. It was a sacrifice that had to be made to squeeze the massive starship through the tiny space available. Keeping them up would have resulted in the powerful energy screen colliding with those of the Jem'Hadar and causing substantial damage to *Eagle*.

"Fire phasers, both targets," the captain said.

*Eagle* passed through the gap between the two attack ships. The phaser arrays mounted on the upper and lower part of the ship's saucer

section fired at each Jem'Hadar vessel at point-blank range, nearly doubling their effectiveness. The beams tore through their shields like paper and drilled deep into their hulls.

Within seconds it was over. *Eagle* was clear.

"Redistribute shields," Edison said, unable to fully mask the relief that had crept into his voice.

The main screen had shifted to an aft view. One of the two ships had not survived *Eagle*'s daring maneuver. It had lost its port nacelle and was spinning wildly out of control until it was utterly consumed by a massive explosion. *Eagle*'s phasers had apparently ripped through their engineering section and destabilized the warp core.

The event passed without comments on the bridge.

The second vessel even though heavily damaged was not yet beaten. In an uncharacteristic move for the Jem'Hadar, the ship changed heading and jumped to warp.

Edison couldn't quite believe it. "They're escaping."

"That's new," said Culsten and received an agreeing nod from Deen at his side.

Tren took a deep breath. "Follow them."

Edison turned to the Federation agent. It had sounded like an order. "Excuse me?"

But she looked at the captain when she spoke again. "We need to stop them."

Deen was equally irritated and she turned around to face the command area. "I thought this mission was too important to be delayed?"

"There is no time to explain," she said, shrugging off the questions before returning her attention to Owens. "Mike?"

He looked at her. "Are you sure this is necessary?"

Her eyes mirrored unwavering determination. "Absolutely. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't."

"You didn't ask," Deen said under her breath and turned back to her station.

Edison wanted to give Deen a warning glare for being so outspoken but he couldn't help but agree with her.

Tren did glare at Deen, even if was just at her back.

"Very well," Owens finally said. "Mister Culsten, engage to intercept."

"Engaging."

*Eagle* jumped to high warp, following the fleeing Jem'Hadar vessel. It had taken so much damage that it had not been able to muster much more than warp seven. It was easy prey and it soon enough reappeared on *Eagle*'s viewscreen.

"They have sustained heavy damage to their shields and weapons systems," Leva said. "Their life support system is also fluctuating."

"Torpedoes?" said Edison.

Leva shook his head. "Launchers are not ready."

Owens stood up and glanced at Leva.

"We've been having some trouble with the launchers since we left the starbase," he said defensively. There was clearly some unspoken subtext in

what he was saying, and the way he briefly glared at D'Karr, as if he blamed the Klingon for this state of affairs.

"Options?" Owens said.

"Phasers will be ineffective at this speed and distance," said Edison.

D'Karr stepped forward. "We could use the tractor beam to force them to sub-light speeds."

Leva quickly shook his head. "That is not a recommended procedure."

"Will it work?" Owens said.

"It will if we transfer warp power to the emitter. A few seconds would suffice."

"That would drop us out of warp and—" Leva stopped when he realized his mistake, clearly somewhat embarrassed he chose to express his feelings with an icy look directed at the Klingon instead. D'Karr responded with a self-satisfied smirk.

Owens, either oblivious to the rivalry or choosing to ignore it, nodded. "Lock on with a tractor beam and get ready to transfer power."

"Edison to engineering. Stand by to transfer warp power to the tractor beam emitter."

"Yes, sir. You are aware that we will drop to impulse?"

He grinned. "That is the idea. Bridge out." He turned to look at Deen. "Engage tractor beam."

"Engaging."

A powerful blue beam shot out from *Eagle*'s secondary hull and like a lasso connected firmly to the Jem'Hadar ship.

Edison narrowed his eyes. "Transfer power now."

As anticipated *Eagle* suddenly dropped out of warp, forcing the Jem'Hadar to sub-light as well. The tractor beam fluctuated for a few seconds and then collapsed as the emitter was unable to process the amount of power it was being fed.

"What are you doing?" said Leva with irritation as D'Karr stepped up next to him to attend to the tactical board.

"I'm transferring power to the phasers otherwise we blow out the tractor-beam emitter," he said and then turned to the captain. "Phasers at one hundred forty percent power."

Owens didn't show his surprise at D'Karr's unexpected actions. "Fire phasers."

Leva hesitated for a moment before following the order. "Firing."

The Jem'Hadar's shields were no match for the overcharged phaser blast that easily pierced the ship like a hot knife through butter. Small explosions ripped across the vessel's hull and then quietly ceased. The Jem'Hadar attack vessel simply remained there, drifting and with no signs of power or life.

"The enemy vessel has been neutralized," Leva said.

Owens turned to Jana Tren already expecting what she was about to say.

"They have to be destroyed."

There was a moment of silence on the bridge as nobody spoke. It wasn't because Tren's comment had come as a particular shock to them.

Nor did it stem from the prospect of killing more Jem'Hadar. *Eagle* had faced numerous in combat before and the outcome had usually always been their complete destruction. But this was the first time *Eagle*'s crew had been put into a position to be able to decide over the life or death of their foes. Both Tren and D'Karr seemed untroubled by the dilemma but Edison and he guessed the other Starfleet officers couldn't ignore the moral implications as easily.

Owens simply nodded.

"Mister Leva," Edison said, "status of the launchers?"

"Ready to fire."

He glanced at the viewscreen and the doomed Jem'Hadar vessel drifting there. He wondered how many Jem'Hadar were still alive. He didn't bother to check. "Load a tri-cobalt device and fire."

*Eagle* fired a single, high-yield explosive that tore the Jem'Hadar ship to pieces, leaving behind nothing but dust and debris.

"Stand down from Red Alert," said Owens.

The red alarm lights ceased and were instantly replaced by the standard illumination.

"Mister Culsten, resume our previous course and engage at maximum warp."

"Aye, sir."

Tren stood from her chair, a small smile forming on her lips as if to congratulate the crew on their successful engagement. It quickly disappeared when she found nobody to return it.

Edison stepped up next to the captain. "Sir, could I have a word with you in private?"

Owens nodded briefly looked around the bridge and then headed straight for the doors to his ready room with Edison in tow. "Lieutenant Deen, you have the bridge," he said just before crossing into his office.

Deen was caught off guard and threw him a surprised glance only to see the doors closing behind the captain and the first officer.

She stood from her station and noticed that Xylion, who would have been next in the chain of command had already left the bridge to attend other duties. That left Leva as the logical person for Owens to have handed over command before he and Edison had left the bridge.

Instead, he had tapped her, and she was pretty certain it wasn't because of an oversight.

Leva stared at her, directing his ire at the obvious slight at her. Then he quickly turned away and left the bridge.

She decided not to take it personally and took the center seat.

"Lieutenant," said Jana Tren in acknowledgment.

Deen looked up as if noticing her standing in the middle of the bridge for the first time. "I don't mean to be rude, ma'am," she said in a cool tone. "But regulations are quite clear about civilians on the bridge."

Tren nodded slowly and turned to the exit. She changed her mind midway and looked back at the younger woman. "You know, Lieutenant, I don't have to be a Betazoid to know that you are not being very honest."

"I beg your pardon."

"You quite obviously meant to be rude," she said and then stepped into the turbolift.

\* \* \*

"We have a serious problem on this ship, Commander," said Owens the moment the doors to his ready room had shut close behind the first officer. He continued to round his desk.

Edison nodded slowly. He had asked to speak to Owens on a different matter but he had expected the captain to bring up their current situation first. "I realize that."

Owens didn't sit down. He remained at eye level with Edison, emphasizing the weight he put on the matter. "Good. That means that I can spare us both the speech about how a starship cannot afford any single officer not to work at their very best capabilities during times of war and how just one weak link endangers the lives of the entire crew."

Edison remained in a near-at-attention posture. "I have underestimated the problem with Commander Leva."

Owens took his chair. "You certainly have."

Edison knew that he had been a rather spoiled first officer since he had come onboard *Eagle*.

Except for a few exceptions, the people under his command had always been the very epitome of a Starfleet crew and he could count on one hand the number of disciplinary actions he'd had to initiate as an XO.

There had been conflicts in the past, even the best crews experienced problems from time to time but on *Eagle*, those types of problems had most often been dealt with amongst each other and without the need for official punitive measures.

Edison had trusted that Leva would sort out his problems himself like he had promised; instead of having them affect his duties. He was upset about the breakdown in trust and even more that he had to be reminded by his captain that what he was doing was not enough.

"Gene," Owens said, his voice softening now. "You cannot afford to be Mister-Nice-Guy anymore. I need Leva to get his act together or have him replaced. I really don't want to lose him right now either but I'm starting to think that we might be better off without him in his current state of mind."

Edison could do nothing but agree with Owens. "I hate for his career coming into jeopardy because he cannot handle a Klingon. But you are absolutely right, sir. We cannot afford his personal feelings endangering this ship."

"You do what you have to," the captain said and turned to his brand new desk computer that had only recently replaced the old one. It was a clear sign that he was finished with the conversation.

Edison didn't move.

The captain shot him another glance. "Is there something else?"

"Actually there is, sir."

"That's right; you asked to speak to me. What's on your mind?" he said and gestured for him to take a seat.

edison was reluctant to take the offer as he anticipated that the captain might not like what he had to say. "There is another person on this ship I would like to discuss with you," he said and took the seat. "Somebody who is not a member of this crew."

“D’Karr?” Owens said. “I don’t think we need to worry about him too much. He needs a refresher course on our rules and regs but otherwise, I believe he has been very resourceful.”

Edison nodded slowly. He couldn’t quite tell if the captain was trying to avoid the issue on purpose or not. “I agree but I was not speaking about D’Karr.”

Owens leaned back in his chair. He clearly knew what was coming.

“How well do you know Agent Tren, sir?”

The captain hesitated. “Very well.”

Edison barely contained the skepticism in his eyes. “I’m concerned that her attitude is endangering not only this ship but also this mission.”

“We don’t really know much about this mission.”

“That’s exactly my point, sir.”

“I have been made aware that her authority is coming directly from the highest levels of the administration. There is very little we can do about that,” Owens said.

But Edison knew the captain well enough to realize that he was trying to build a defense for Tren. It was the only explanation that made sense. Ordinarily, the safety of his crew was of paramount importance, no matter who was giving the orders.

“Don’t you think it is somewhat unconventional that we are taking orders from a civilian? There is a clear chain of command at work in Starfleet. There is a reason why we do not answer to members of the administration or even to the Council. We answer to the admiralty and they answer to the civilian government.”

"You speak like a military man, Gene," Owens said with a small smirk.

"I do not *want* to be a soldier, sir."

"Nor do I," he said, his smile now gone. "Do you think I like her orders? Hunting down Jem'Hadar like they're animals, not even considering taking prisoners?"

"Then why are we doing this, sir?

Owens let out a small sigh as he left his chair and turned to the window. For a moment seemingly content to watch the stars streak by instead of continuing the conversation.

"I trust her, Gene," he said after a few moments.

"Do you really?"

Owens turned away from the window to face his first officer and met his determined glance. "Yes," he said. But his voice failed to carry true confidence.

Edison thought he understood. It was clear that Owens cared quite a bit for Tren. Or once had. And he could sympathize with the surprisingly strong emotional impulses that accompanied caring deeply for one special person. With love. But he didn't know half of how Owens felt about Tren and his one and only concern at this moment was not his captain's possible feelings toward Jana Tren but the safety of the ship.

"For the record, sir," he said in the most official tone of voice he could fashion. "I do not trust Agent Tren and I believe her recklessness might pose a serious threat to this ship and her crew."

Owens looked up with surprise at first. But his glance quickly turned cold as ice. "Duly noted, Commander."

"I also want to suggest that you consider disregarding her orders on the basis that she has no direct authority over this vessel," Edison continued, knowing that he was treading on rapidly thinning ice now. The captain's increasingly frosty behavior was an undeniable indication that he did not want to hear what he was saying.

"I told you, she has my trust," Owens said harshly and sat back down in his chair. "I will make a note of your remarks in my log. That'll be all, Commander."

Edison nodded slowly and turned to head for the exit. Part of him wanted to say something else, something to defuse the sudden tension he had brought on between them. Just before he left the ready room he shot a glance over his shoulder. But Owens was not looking his way; in fact, he was doing nothing else but waiting for him to leave. So he did.

## VI – ARRIVAL

Jana Tren's eyes were sharply focused on the gold-plated statue of the predatory bird which stood at the center of the upper level of the Nest when Owens found her sitting by herself at a table, with the remains of a half-eaten lunch still on her plate.

"Goldie."

She looked up with a surprised expression.

"That's her name," Owens said and pointed at the statue. "The name the crew has given her. She's the ship's unofficial mascot," he added with a smile and sat at the table, opposite her.

"What kind of bird is it?"

Owens frowned. "Isn't it obvious? An eagle, of course."

She nodded slowly.

"Don't tell me there are no eagles on Betazed."

"No eagles. Plenty of hawks and falcons though," she said and took a sip from her blue-hued beverage.

"You've spent half your childhood on Earth. I find it hard to believe you've never seen an eagle whilst you were there."

"I don't know birds, Michael," she said her tone starting to show signs of annoyance. "It's really not my thing."

"No, I suppose not. Although I do recall you used to have a fondness for animals. You liked watching the whales come into the San Francisco Bay," he said, being reminded of the many times they had strolled up and down the Golden Gate Bridge back when they had both lived in the city. His eyes focused on the dark-haired woman again.

"Times change," she said and picked up her fork to return to her meal. After a moment, however, she thought better of it.

"So what is your thing these days?"

She let out a sigh and prepared to leave. "If you've come here to attempt to pry information out of me again -"

He cut her off, reaching out for her lower arm. "Don't leave. Please."

She settled back in her chair, expectancy shimmering in her eyes.

"I wasn't referring to your mission."

"What then?"

"I was wondering about..." he couldn't get himself to finish his sentence. He didn't have to.

Her facial features relaxed slightly as she sensed what he had been thinking. She leaned forward a bit. "I loved being with you, Michael. I loved every second of it."

"Me too," he said, his voice barely above a whisper now.

"I'll always treasure those memories and I wouldn't want to give them up for anything but let's face facts. That was a long time ago and we have changed a lot. Both of us. I mean we were kids back then, naïve and full of crazy dreams."

He shrugged. "I dreamt of becoming a starship captain."

Tren apparently didn't have a reply to that. "I'd never thought I'd see you again, Mike."

"I understand." And he could not deny that he had felt the same way. And deep down he had been perfectly fine with that reality. But reality tended to change suddenly and without warning. And now that it had, everything was different – felt different.

"Besides," she said. "I cannot afford this right now. There is a war and I have way too much on my mind at the moment. To be frank, you'd only be a distraction," she said her black eyes as cold as her voice. "I'm sorry."

"No, don't be," he said quickly. "And I agree. We all need to be focused on winning this thing. I just wanted to..." he stopped himself to give his voice more firmness, trying to cling to his dwindling dignity. "Clear the air between us."

"Good," she said and once again started to leave her seat.

"There is just one thing I don't understand."

She looked down at him.

"Yesterday after we met and we were in your quarters it didn't quite feel as if you didn't want to be distracted."

She blushed so slightly that nobody would have noticed. Except that Owens had seen that look of embarrassment on her face before. "I think it would be best for both of us if we simply forgot about that incident," she said and left the table.

He looked after her.

She didn't turn back and he didn't expect her to. He wasn't sure what to do. Her words, even her tone, had been clear enough. But he didn't want to accept them and certainly not give up without a fight.

Not this time.

She was right about one thing, he knew. He could not afford chasing after her nor did he feel it appropriate for a person in his position to do so. He had to accept the situation and move on, not unlike after a failed mission.

Failure had never been something he had been good at.

When she had finally disappeared from his sight, he noticed a crewman looking in his direction.

It was the same young Tellarite man he had run into outside her quarters a day ago. The crewman quickly diverted his glance when he spotted the captain looking his way.

Owens sighed, concerned that his reputation was yet another thing he probably had to start worrying about.

\* \* \*

DeMara Deen had spotted Owens enter the upper level of the Nest while she had returned her empty plate to the replicator. She had considered joining him but by the time she had finished with the replicator and turned back, she had found him sitting with Jana Tren in deep conversation. She hadn't given the whole matter much thought and turned away.

Taking the winding staircase to the level below, she had grabbed an empty stool by the bar and ordered a Denobulan Sunrise.

As she considered the drink with the various layers of different liquids, each sparkling in a different color, she recalled the last time she had ordered this specific beverage. It had not been a particularly happy time in her life

It was rare for members of her species to suffer from depression but not entirely unheard of. When she had experienced it, she had been utterly confused by the emotional turmoil that seemingly gripped her entire being.

That had been ten years ago when she had left her home world for the first time. She had come to Starfleet Academy on Earth with great excitement and anticipation but after just a few months she had become painfully aware of how different she was from everyone else there.

At first, she was surprised, and also somewhat flattered by the attention she was suddenly exposed to. She had made friends with several Deltans who could somewhat relate to her situation. Unlike the Deltans she had been utterly ill-prepared for the experience and uncertain how to handle it.

Frustrated with her inability to manage her own life, she had ultimately decided that the best course of action was to return to her home world. Ironically, it had been Michael Owens, her academic advisor and friend who had convinced her to stay on Earth and complete the Academy. She had never come to regret that decision.

She was pulled out of her thoughts by a commotion coming from deeper in the Nest.

A crowd had formed and at its center was D'Karr, his deep baritone voice easily drowning out all others. On a different day, she wouldn't have hesitated to investigate but today she simply didn't feel like mingling.

Just as she was about to turn back to her Denobulan Sunrise she noticed that Owens had also stepped up to the bar, at the opposite end of the counter. Jana Tren was nowhere in sight.

There were several crewmembers between them and even though she could see him, he hadn't spotted her yet. Her glance lingered on him for longer than she had been aware of.

"You have feelings for him, don't you?"

"I think so," she said without giving it another thought.

She snapped her head toward the bar from where she thought the voice had come from.

Three barkeepers were currently tending to patrons but only one was close enough to her to have been the source of the comment. Bensu.

She had answered the question without realizing it, somehow believing that it had been nothing more than an abstract thought forming inside her head.

Feeling a sudden sting of embarrassment she looked around and was relieved to find that nobody else seemed to have picked up on her remark. When she glanced back at the dark-skinned bartender she saw him nodding slowly and then moving down the counter to attend to another customer.

She couldn't let the question go. It had come completely out of the blue and she had not been given a fair chance to think about it, she decided. She began to move down the bar with Bensu, squeezing past other crewmembers.

"What was that?" she said as soon as she had caught up with him.

"I said that you had feelings for him," he said gesturing toward the captain at the other end of the long counter, still unaware of Deen and Bensu. The bartender had a large grin on his face while he removed a couple of empty glasses from below the counter.

"What do you mean by feelings?" she said but quickly regretted the question. "He's a very close friend. Of course, I have certain feelings for him," she added before he could answer.

He nodded. "Of course," Bensu said and began mixing a drink for another customer sitting further down the bar.

"Excuse me," she said as she slid past a Benzite ensign next to her to stay level with the elusive bartender. She found an empty gap at the counter and leaned toward Bensu again. "We've met a long time ago. He was the first human to visit my world and we have been close friends ever since," she said. "Just that, friends."

Bensu poured the beverage into a tall glass. It was a clear liquid that turned a deep shade of red as soon as it was out of the bottle. "You have a strong, meaningful friendship."

"Exactly."

An Aurelian lieutenant took the drink and moved away from the counter. But another patron a couple of meters down was trying to get Bensu's attention. He promptly approached the gray-haired Efrosian.

Deen was satisfied for only a moment before she decided to follow him again, almost running right into a young crewman standing right next to her.

"It's just that when you said I had feelings for him," she said but then stopped herself, not wishing for anyone around her to get the wrong idea. Thankfully most of the patrons were distracted by the loud Klingon at the other side of the Nest to pay much attention to her exchange with the bartender. "It sounded as if you were implying more than friendship," she said, being careful to keep her voice down.

Bensu finished taking the Efrosian's order. "Implications are a funny thing," he said, shooting her another smile before he turned to fetch a bottle.

She found the answer confusing and sidestepped another guest. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Oftentimes,” he said and turned to face her again, “people hear exactly what they want to hear.” Bensu had found the bottle and returned to his waiting customer.

“What was it you wanted to hear?”

The question was not coming from Bensu but from the person right next to her and his voice was painfully familiar. She turned her head slowly. Unbeknownst to her, she had stepped right up to Michael Owens.

She looked straight into his eyes but couldn’t think of a single thing to say. Lying had never come easy to her.

“Dee?”

She finally managed to shrug her shoulders. “Nothing important,” she said and put on a smile to try and deflect his curiosity.

He redirected his focus on his nearly empty glass. “I sure know what I would have liked to hear,” he said and took another sip from his drink. “I most certainly didn’t just now.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” he said and then looked up at her. The smile on his face seemed forced. “We can’t get distracted. There is a war going on or hadn’t you noticed?”

She tried to nod her head in agreement but for some reason didn’t quite manage.

He turned away from the counter to look at the large forward-facing windows of the Nest.

She wasn't sure what had caught his attention at first. She got her answer just a few seconds later when *Eagle* dropped out of warp. The stars outside the window were now standing still.

Owens knew his ship better than most. He had felt the deceleration through the deck plates long before she had.

"We're here," she said.

Owens nodded and stood. "Time to see what this outpost looks like. Maybe we can finally figure out what all this secrecy has been all about."

She looked back to the bar, trying to find Bensu. He was busy mixing another drink further and didn't make eye contact with her.

"Are you coming?" he said after he had already headed toward the exit.

This time she did nod. She stepped away from the counter and followed him out of the Nest. Just as they approached the doors they opened to allow Nora Laas to enter. She passed her on the way out, offering her an absentminded nod.

\* \* \*

Nora had replied with a smile and a nod when she had walked by the captain and Deen who were understandably in a hurry to leave the Nest and return to the bridge now that *Eagle* had arrived at her destination.

However, she couldn't quite account for their rather grim expressions. She had to admit that she cared little for the reason of their bad disposition at that moment.

Even though there were plenty of reasons to feel depressed, she felt happier than she had in a long time. Now that Edison had finally opened up to her, being with him had taken on a completely new meaning. Their relationship was no longer a mere fling but a serious affair that could easily go all the way.

She could see herself marrying Edison at some point in the future already. It was a thought she would keep to herself for now but she felt that it was more probable than not. She loved him and he loved her. For Nora it was the first time she had felt this way for a man and the first time that she could imagine a future with somebody at her side.

She liked it.

She had come to the Nest to stay out of the way of the crew's efforts to unload the cargo onto Epsilon Twelve. The outpost was nothing like Starbase 74 with its significant resources but instead consisted of a relatively small structure on the surface of Ligos IV.

Many years ago the planet had been a small mining outpost and Epsilon Twelve had been constructed utilizing the already existing underground tunnels. It seemed unlikely that she was going to see the base, however. A brief from Agent Tren had made it clear that none of *Eagle*'s personnel were allowed onto the station. These restrictions and many others like it would make the process of unloading the cargo a long and difficult task.

It didn't take long for Nora to take note of the noise emanating from one of the tables. The large crowd that had gathered around the Klingon was not easily missed either. She approached the scene without the concern of a security officer but with the curiosity of a spectator.

D'Karr sat on a chair, loudly summarizing *Eagle*'s last battle to his captivated audience.

Nora had not been on the bridge during combat but she quickly concluded that his story was somewhat exaggerated.

In his version, the ship was pitted against four Jem'Hadar vessels that had nearly ripped *Eagle* to pieces had he not come up with a life-saving maneuver in the nick of time.

From what Edison had told her, D'Karr had indeed been very helpful but *Eagle* had easily triumphed over the enemy. She could understand why he had his audience paying such rapt attention to his every word and gesture. D'Karr was a born storyteller and she quickly found herself mesmerized.

D'Karr was just about to finish describing *Eagle's* near collision with the kamikaze Jem'Hadar ships when he spotted her in the crowd.

"Laas!"

She was taken aback by the sudden focus on her. "Uh, I didn't mean to interrupt," she said quickly.

"Nonsense," he said and gestured her closer. "If there is anybody on this ship who deserves to sit at a table of fearless warriors, it is you," he bellowed as she carefully approached the man.

Only now did she notice how much room the spectators had given D'Karr, clearly concerned about getting too close to the excited Klingon. She also spotted the four silver bottles on the table in front of him. One was lying on its side, droplets of red fluid leaking onto the white table top. "I'm not sure if I'd say I'm a fearless warrior," she said with a widening smile.

"Your humility doesn't suit you," he said with a stern look on his face. He pushed out a chair with his leg. "Sit, talk, and most importantly: Drink." He grabbed one of the bottles and placed it right in front of her.

As suggested she took the chair. She eyed the bottle suspiciously.

D'Karr laughed at her expression. "Blood wine. Nectar of warriors. I was pre-warned that Federation ships serve nothing but fake and watered-down swill that supposedly passes as alcohol."

"So you brought your own?"

"Of course," he said and took a gulp from another bottle.

Nora carefully picked up the bottle and immediately looked for a glass. There was none in sight. She shrugged and followed D'Karr's example. She was unprepared for the unusually strong taste and the way the wine was threatening to put her throat on fire. It took all her willpower to force herself not to spit out the burning liquid. She could do nothing to prevent the resulting coughing fit, however.

D'Karr howled with laughter. "You get used to it."

Nora's face had turned tomato-red and she pounded her chest as she nodded slowly. Besides a handful of occasions on which she had partaken of blue springwine, she had never really been a big drinker. And springwine had certainly not prepared her for this. "That's what I'm afraid of."

D'Karr erupted with laughter once more. "Talk woman. Tell us about your tales of glorious battle."

"Well, where to start?" she said. "I had a very unpleasant encounter with a squadron of Breen once. It was a close call; we nearly lost an entire away team."

D'Karr nodded. "The Breen are treacherous fighters. But they lack honor. That is their weakness."

"A few months ago we got into a skirmish with a whole bar full of mercenaries. We were outmanned and outgunned."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he said and finished another bottle. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and let the bottle drop to the floor where Nora spotted two more empty ones. She couldn't believe he had consumed all that blood wine and was still able to speak coherently.

Not to appear weak, she took another sip from her bottle. This time she was more prepared and she fought the urge to spit and cough much more successfully.

D'Karr did spot her discomfort though and continued to laugh.

"No offense but you seem heavily intoxicated," she said. "Perhaps I should take you to sickbay."

"Intoxicated? I'm celebrating our victory. But I'm far from sick. I'm all out drunk," he said, laughing and starting another bottle. "Tell me more, who else have you faced in combat?"

"A lot of Cardassians," she said her voice taking on a more sorrowful tone.

Even D'Karr seemed to take notice. "Cardassians are a cowardly race. Not worth another thought."

She agreed wholeheartedly.

"Then there was the time we infiltrated a Romulan base. It was supposed to be a covert mission but we ran into some heavy opposition."

"Romulans," D'Karr spat. "Green-blooded devils, twice as bad as Breen scum."

Nora erupted with laughter. She couldn't help herself, the alcohol had made her unusually giddy and the laughter escaped her mouth involuntarily.

"Laas?"

She turned to see Leva standing nearby, staring right at her. She was certain he hadn't been there when she had arrived. He didn't look so much upset than disappointed.

She sobered up in seconds when she spotted the look in his judgmental green eyes. She felt like a misbehaving child having been caught with the wrong kind of friends and indulging in an illegal substance. She slowly got to her feet. "So."

D'Karr simply laughed. "Well, maybe I'll make an exception for a *half* Romulan," he said, picked up a bottle, and threw it at Leva who easily caught it. "If you can hold your blood wine, that is." Another belly laugh.

Leva let the bottle slip through his fingers, dropping it onto the floor. He stepped closer to the table. "I have no intention of behaving like an animal," he said and turned to Nora. "I've been waiting for you upstairs."

"Oh right, I'm sorry," she said quickly as she recalled their date. D'Karr had been so entertaining that she had completely forgotten that she was to meet him for lunch.

"An animal?" D'Karr roared and jumped to his feet surprisingly fast for his intoxicated state. "You are the animal here, Romulan. A man who doesn't know how to celebrate victory is no man at all. You have no hearts in there, no soul, and worse of all, no honor," he said and tapped Leva's chest.

"Don't touch me," D'Karr said through clenched teeth and pushed D'Karr forcefully away causing him to stumble backward and fall over a chair.

"So," Nora cried out with anger and quickly proceeded to the fallen D'Karr.

"He shouldn't have touched me," he said with a mere shrug and turned.

Nora knelt next to the Klingon. "Are you all right?"

He just laughed at her but she didn't understand.

Then, without warning he jumped back unto his feet with unlikely agility and charged Leva with a roaring battle cry.

"Watch out." Nora tried to warn Leva.

He didn't need the warning, D'Karr was making enough noise all by himself. Leva turned but didn't have the chance to get out of his way. D'Karr tackled Leva and they flew crashing onto a table and then with a loud thud both of them landed on the floor.

Leva had quickly detangled himself from the Klingon only to face him once more.

"Stop it," Nora protested loudly.

"Now *this* is what I call a celebration," D'Karr growled with a feral smile on his lips as he began to circle Leva.

"You won't find this so amusing once I break your neck," he said, never taking his eyes off his opponent.

By now nearly everyone in the Nest had come to watch the violent confrontation between D'Karr and Leva. They were giving both of them plenty of room as they formed a large circle around them. They were watching the fight with fascinated silence.

Most of them were well aware of some of the more combative Klingon traditions and couldn't be sure if this was a serious confrontation or not. In any case, most had likely never witnessed a bar brawl on a Federation starship before and that alone captivated their curiosity.

Nora could see in Leva's eyes that he was deadly serious. He wanted to kill D'Karr and she knew she had to put a stop to this quickly.

Leva attacked with several vicious blows most of which were deflected by D'Karr. One aimed at his lower jaw connected, and D'Karr spat blood.

Encouraged by his small victory, Leva got up close and personal, trying to end this quickly.

D'Karr had anticipated the move and smashed his reinforced forehead ridges against Leva's brow. The powerful blow made him stumble backward.

"This is enough. This isn't a boxing ring."

Nora was surprised to see Bensu boldly stepping right in between the two fighters with seemingly little concern for his own safety. He approached Leva who was coming around again, bracing himself for another attack. "I think you've had enough," he said and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Out of my way," Leva hissed angrily and pushed Bensu away. He did underestimate his strength and the barkeeper went flying through the room, landing on top of two other crewmembers who were unable to get out of the way in time.

D'Karr was momentarily distracted and Leva took full advantage. He reached out for a chair with just one hand and swung it at the Klingon's side. The force of the attack made D'Karr lose his footing and he collapsed to the floor.

Bensu in the meantime tried to get back onto his feet but didn't manage. A young ensign, wearing an azure-colored, medical uniform, quickly checked him over. He nodded, letting her know that he was fine.

She had about enough, she stepped closer to the combatants. Leva seemed to have the upper hand now, punching D'Karr's exposed ribs. The Klingon took the punishment without uttering a sound.

"So, this is your last warning, stop this now," she said sharply.

But Leva didn't hear, his eyes filled with hate, he had seemingly one thing and one thing only on his mind. The destruction of D'Karr, nothing else seemed to matter. And his fighting style was suffering from his blind and irrational motivation.

D'Karr seemed to realize this.

Nora was about to step between them and end the battle one way or another. It was not a prospect she relished. She knew she could subdue one of them but both would be tricky. A few years earlier she wouldn't have hesitated but now she had to consider the odds and they weren't in her favor.

Fortunately for her, she didn't have to. The doors to the Nest opened and Lieutenant José Carlos and four additional security officers stepped into the lounge, followed by a couple of medics.

Carlos quickly stepped up to her. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it," he said, mesmerized by the scene in front of him.

"Give me that," she said and snapped the phaser from his holster.

The tables had turned for Leva. His attacks had been effective but he had not considered his defense. He had left himself wide open and D'Karr didn't need an invitation. He easily blocked one of the blows, grabbed Leva's arm then spun the Romulan around, pushing him head-first into a nearby column. Leva impacted hard and went down quickly.

"D'Karr," Nora shouted, training her weapon at him.

The Klingon looked her way for less than a second but the blood lust was too strong to let up now and Leva was recovering fast. The Romulan was on his hands and knees, green blood trickling down his lips as he tried to stand.

D'Karr placed a kick right into his midsection, causing Leva to flip over.

He did not get a chance for another blow. The red and orange phaser beam hit him square in the back and he stumbled to the ground. A few moments later he was out.

Leva, even though dazed, made it back onto his legs. He looked at the Klingon by his feet and laughed. Then he looked up to see Nora, still holding the weapon. "I knew you'd make the right choice," he said and looked down at D'Karr's stunned body. "Who's the animal now?" he said and kicked the unconscious man right in the ribs.

"So'Dan."

He turned to look at Nora.

She narrowed her eyes and drew a beat on him. "Do me a favor and just shut the hell up," she said and fired.

Leva stayed on his feet for a moment as if he couldn't believe what had just happened. But the discharge forced his body into unconsciousness and he dropped like a stone, landing right next to the Klingon.

Nora sighed heavily and handed the weapon back to her stunned deputy. "I really wish I didn't have to do that," she said without taking her eyes off the two, now peaceful fighters, laid out on the floor amid a scene of destruction of upturned chairs and tables, broken glass, spilled drinks, and debris.

She turned away from the maddening scene. "Medic."

\* \* \*

Ligos IV was an unremarkable, small crimson-hued planet, which to Owens looked disturbingly similar to the color of human blood.

Perhaps it wasn't the color of the planet but the fact that he hadn't been able to find out anything noteworthy about the Epsilon Twelve outpost that concerned him, as he regarded the world from the window of his ready room.

How was it that a base located deep in the hinterlands of the Federation and many light-years from the frontlines could be of such importance that it warranted a ship-of-the-line like *Eagle* to be diverted from all other tasks for what amounted to nothing more than a supply run? How could anything of consequence to the ongoing war effort be focused here? Had Starfleet and the Federation already given up on winning this war and were they already planning for defeat?

He didn't want to believe it.

What he did know about Epsilon Twelve was that the Federation considered it a strategically important asset. Formally an unsuccessful mining station, records showed that the outpost had started operations in its current iteration less than one month ago.

Its crew complement was listed as fifty-eight Starfleet officers and personnel, a small number but then again that was minus the three-hundred-strong detachment *Eagle* had been supposed to bring here.

Epsilon Twelve was commanded by Captain Zalak, a man as shrouded in mystery as the outpost itself. He had spoken to the Bolian only briefly immediately after arriving in the Ligos system. Now he was about to learn

much more about the man and hopefully about what could be so important about his little outpost.

The annunicator distracted him from his contemplations.

"Enter," he said and turned to face away from the window to greet his visitor.

The door panels parted with a hiss to allow Ashley Wenera to step into the ready room. Owens was surprised to see her. She didn't make many house calls.

"Doctor, how can I help you?" he said and took his chair. "Don't tell me it's time for my routine physical again. Feels like it was only yesterday you had me probed and prodded."

The raven-haired doctor smiled. "More like a few weeks, but no, that's not why I'm here. Unless of course, you'd like to volunteer."

"I wish I could but I'm afraid I have other plans."

She nodded and took a seat. "That's why I'm here."

"That's curious considering that I've barely learned of them myself."

"Never underestimate the speed at which news travels through this ship, Captain. I have my ears everywhere," she said with a smile, revealing two rows of perfectly white teeth that stood in contrast to the pitch-black locks falling onto her shoulders.

"They're hardly a well-kept secret."

She nodded and then froze as she looked him straight in the eye. "I can't go."

"Captain Zalak invited the entire senior staff, Doctor. That includes you."

"I realize that."

"And if memory serves me, it was you who suggested that the crew find some time to relax while we are not directly involved in combat operations? Don't you think a change of scenery and a good meal would do just that?"

Again she nodded, more carefully this time. "Perhaps. You see the problem is that I started a very delicate experiment that includes notoriously unstable Alterian dry moss. It'll require very careful supervision. If this experiment succeeds, I'll be able to synthesize a wide variety of analgesic compounds and other medical drugs, which as you know, have become increasingly scarce over the last few months."

Owens leaned back in his chair. He couldn't shake the feeling that the doctor's speech had been carefully rehearsed. "I see. And your extensive medical staff cannot –"

"It would take at least a day to familiarize anyone with the intricacies of the experiment," she said before he had even been able to finish his sentence, shaking her head. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to cut you off," she added quickly.

Owens nodded his head forgivingly. "So this has nothing at all to do with the reputation of commanding officers of remote outposts tending to be tedious conversationalists?"

The embarrassed look on her face that was quickly replaced by clearly feigned surprise was all the answer he needed.

"Very well," he said before giving her a chance to reply. "You're excused, doctor," he said with the tone of a school teacher addressing his pupil. He cracked a smile. "But consider this. You don't get to go on many away missions and who knows when you're going to get another chance at one."

"I think I'll take those chances, sir," she said and stood.

Owens was of course right and they both knew it. Ashley Wenera had never been the first to volunteer for an away mission. It seemed she preferred the relative safety of her sickbay to the uncertainties of beaming onto a strange and unknown world.

"Doctor Wenera, please report to the brig."

She looked up at the ceiling as if the unidentified person who had spoken was somewhere above her. She exchanged a quick look with the captain but he was as clueless as she was. "I'll be right there, Wenera out," she said and then readdressed the captain. "I better go."

Owens nodded. Something had happened and he very much doubted that he wouldn't find out about it shortly. It hadn't sounded good and for now, he preferred to remain blissfully ignorant.

She headed for the doors. "Have fun," she said with a wicked smile just as she slipped out of the ready room.

Owens rolled his eyes.

He knew that fun was probably the last thing to be expected by Zalak's dinner invitation. The reputation he had alluded to earlier was quite well deserved. Officers who served on stations far removed from the hot spots of the galaxy had often very little to say and yet rarely did that stop them from talking. Even worse they hungered for information a starship crew could provide. More often than not these social visits turned out to be nothing more than dull interviews. Owens was not looking forward to dinner except for a chance to learn more about their being there in the first place.

\* \* \*

"You need to hold still, Commander."

So'Dan Leva sat on a bare rack in one of *Eagle*'s brigs. He had removed his jacket and shirt to reveal a well-toned, hairless torso that was almost entirely covered with bruises. He seemed very uncomfortable and kept squirming whenever Doctor Wenera attempted to apply the dermal regenerator to his damaged skin.

"This would be much easier in sickbay," she added with a sigh.

"I'm afraid, Gene," Nora said but then quickly corrected herself. "Commander Edison, was quite adamant that So'Dan remained in the brig for the time being."

"I still can't believe you shot me," he said through clenched teeth.

Wenera looked up at Nora with surprise. "You shot him?"

"In my defense, you were acting like an out-of-control jackass," she said.

Leva just shook his head.

"I'm counting two cracked ribs, four bruised ones, and several torn ligaments," she said after consulting her medical tricorder.

"You should see the other guy," Leva mumbled in a self-satisfied tone.

The doctor looked up and straight into his eyes. "I did. He woke up half an hour ago and I released him after a few minutes."

Leva grunted.

"He's younger and has probably seen a lot more hand-to-hand combat. Don't feel bad," Nora said, trying to soothe his bruised ego.

"It's no excuse. And what do you mean you released him? I don't see him anywhere in the brig," he said and threw Nora a demanding look.

She didn't want to answer. She didn't want to tell him that Edison had decided not to keep D'Karr in holding after finding out that Leva had been the main instigator of the fight. She didn't agree with the call but the first officer had argued that D'Karr, as a Klingon, was expected to react in a certain manner whereas Leva, as a senior officer, should have known better than to provoke him in the way that he had. Clearly, his patience with his erratic behavior was coming to an end.

"Don't worry about D'Karr. You should be worried about yourself," Nora said. "Edison is furious about what happened in the Nest and I get the feeling he's not going to let this go this time."

If Leva had any concerns about the repercussions of his actions he knew well how to hide them.

"There," Wenera said and stood up to better appreciate her handiwork. The bruises had mostly disappeared from his body and all that remained were a few streaks of greenish blood. "Good as new. You'll have to give the ribs and ligaments a couple of days to fully heal. I suggest you avoid any more bar room brawl for the time being," she said with a smirk.

"Thank you, Doctor, I'll do what I can," he said but managed to keep any hint of humor out of his tone.

"So what exactly *did* happen?" she said not at all deterred by his obviously sour disposition.

He considered her for a moment before answering. "Nothing I'd care being disseminated across the ship grapevine."

She was clearly taken aback by his chilly tone for a moment. She quickly turned to collect her gear. "Well good luck to you if you intend to keep what happened a secret," she said and got up with her medical case in hand. She threw a glance at Nora who replied with a simple nod.

The doctor stepped to the edge of the brig and the crewman behind the central control console lowered the force field for her. She left the detention complex without another word.

"That wasn't very nice," Nora said as soon as the doctor had left.

He didn't respond as he put his mustard-colored shirt back on.

"What's going on?" she said and sat on the bench next to him. "You know you can talk to me."

"There is nothing to talk about."

"Now that's the understatement of the year."

He stood and took a few steps to get away from his friend. Of course, the small size of the cell didn't allow for much distance. His urge was to get as far away from her as he possibly could but the force field would not let him go anywhere. "I'm sure you don't need a history lesson, Nora."

She didn't buy it. She knew he could be slightly prejudiced on occasions. When she had first met him seven years ago, she had learned that he didn't get along great with Vulcans, because he closely resembled one himself, thanks to his less developed forehead ridges. Apparently, during his academy days, he had often been mistaken as a Vulcan, something that had frustrated him.

During his first year on *Eagle*, he had exhibited some hesitancy when working with Xylion because of his history, but she knew he had long since overcome any such racially-based bias, and he was certainly not a bigot.

She stood and shook her head. "I know you, So, you're not the kind of man who would hate somebody just because of a century-old, irrational feud between two races."

"Then obviously you don't know me as well as you think," he said but kept his back turned to her.

She took a step closer. "You hate him then? You hate him because he's Klingon?"

"I do not hate him," he said with a sigh.

"Then what?"

He turned around. "Listen, it's complicated."

Her attempts to pry a more revealing answer out of him were cut short when Gene Edison entered the brig and stepped up to the cell. His face was expressionless but she knew that he was fuming underneath. She could not remember ever having seen him this angry before.

"Lieutenant," he said briskly, addressing her. "I need to speak to the commander in private."

She nodded but before she left she stepped closer to Leva. "You know you have friends, So, and if you want to talk, you know where to find me," she said and then faced the force field which quickly dropped for her. She stepped out of the cell. "Good luck," she said to Edison under her breath before she darted for the exit.

Edison seemed content to simply stare at the other man without saying a word.

Leva was quickly becoming uncomfortable, unable to shake the feeling that he had embarrassed not only Edison but the entire ship. He just wanted the first officer to yell at him and get it over with.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" he said, his voice calm and never, not quite what Leva had expected.

"I suppose I acted out of line."

"You suppose? Do you think there is anything about this incident that could exonerate you in any way?"

Leva considered this for a moment. "I was off duty," he said, forcing a small smirk on his face. It disappeared instantly when Edison's visage remained completely unchanged.

"I want an explanation, Commander, not a joke."

He nodded but didn't speak.

"I'm waiting."

"With all due respect, sir, I don't understand why I'm the only one being punished in the matter. Doesn't D'Karr deserve part of the blame? Why is he not in the brig?"

"You are a Starfleet officer and fourth-in-command on this ship. As far as you should be concerned, D'Karr is an officer serving under you and therefore you are responsible for his actions as well as for your own. And I've heard enough statements to understand that you could have avoided this incident at any point. D'Karr simply acted the way any Klingon would have in that situation. And I know that I don't need to tell you that. You knew full well what would happen if you provoked him in the manner that you did. Your entire behavior over the last week has been nothing but disgraceful. And it ends here."

"Posting a Klingon on this ship was a mistake," Leva said. "It shouldn't have happened."

"Is that your defense, Commander?"

"An observation."

"That decision was neither mine nor the captain's. In any case, it should be obvious even to you that D'Karr has proven to be a remarkable addition to this crew. It is you who has become the problem." He let those words sink in before continuing. "Do you have anything else to say, Commander?"

He shook his head slightly.

"I was afraid of that. You leave me no choice. I'm removing you from active duty and you'll be restricted to your quarters until further notice. Don't be under any illusions, Commander, this whole incident will be reflected on your file as an official and severe reprimand."

Leva didn't speak, his glance falling to the floor. He was well aware of what such a reprimand could do to his career. It would have been bad enough if he had been just another Starfleet officer but he was not. He was a half-Romulan and that meant that many people in high places had their eyes on him. A slip-up like this could mean the stagnation of his career at best and a discharge at worst.

Edison turned to head for the doors. He stopped after just a few steps to look back at him. "This is all extremely disappointing, Commander. Not only did you let me down but also the captain and your ship," he remained there a moment longer as if he wanted to say more. He ultimately decided not to and swiftly left the brig.

\* \* \*

When Owens stepped into the transporter room he found most of his senior officers already there waiting for him.

Nora Laas quickly approached him before he even had a chance to do a head count. "Sir, I was wondering if it's possible," she said, her voice sounding surprisingly unsteady, "to have permission to remain on board."

He offered her a skeptical look. "Why?"

"Well, there are security drills I've been meaning to run and I have a ton of paperwork that I need to get finished. Also -"

He raised his hand, cutting her off. "Permission denied," he said with a smirk. "Just so you know, Doctor Wenera was a lot more imaginative with her excuse."

Nora nodded slowly accepting the fact that her efforts to weasel herself out of this engagement had utterly failed.

Edison smiled at her embarrassing attempt. But his expression quickly transformed into a mask of serious professionalism when he addressed the captain. "Commander Leva will not be joining us."

Owens acknowledged the report with a curt nod. He had not been fully briefed on the events that had transpired in the Nest a few hours earlier. For now, it was enough for him to know that his first officer had dealt with it. There was going to be plenty of time to worry about the consequences once they had returned from Epsilon Twelve.

"I guess we're all here then. What are we waiting for?"

All eyes darted toward Louise Hopkins who slightly blushed at suddenly being the center of attention. "I mean," she said with a half smile, "It can't be that bad, can it?"

Nora let a heavy sigh escape her hips. "Obviously you haven't met many station commanders," she said and stepped onto the transporter dais.

Hopkins gave her a puzzled expression. When she didn't get an answer she looked over at Deen.

"They do tend to talk a bit," she said.

"A bit?" Edison said.

"Fine then," said Hopkins and stepped up next to Nora. "I'll just look forward to the food."

"That's the attitude, Lieutenant," said Owens with a smile. "Like it or not people, this is all part of the job," he added and took the most center position on the transporter platform and waited for the rest of the officers to arrange themselves around him.

"It sure beats fighting the Dominion," said Edison and placed himself next to the captain.

Owens couldn't agree more. He would gladly visit a hundred remote outposts if it meant an end to the war. But then again, traveling to the far ends of the galaxy had been the reason he had joined Starfleet in the first place. He shot a glance at the always-smiling transporter chief behind the control terminal. "Are we ready, Chief?"

"I have received the coordinates from Epsilon Twelve but I'm having trouble adjusting for the interference," the stout Chinese man reported as he worked the console.

"The outer crust of Ligos IV contains large amounts of tritium ore residue, which emits low-level radiation. It is harmless to most lifeforms but it does interfere with sensory equipment," Xylion said.

Owens had been briefed on this complication before. It was the reason most of the cargo was being transported to the surface by shuttle crafts instead. He had been assured that the transporters would work but that the process would take more time than usual. He couldn't help but wonder if taking a shuttle wouldn't have been a much more reasonable idea.

"Do you need a hand?" said Hopkins.

Chief Chow shook his head. "No, I've got it," he said and looked up. "This might feel a bit different than usual."

"*Define* different," Nora said.

Chow simply smiled at her and activated the controls. "Energizing."

And with that, the six officers on the transporter platform began to dematerialize.

Owens had gone through the transporter more times than he could count and this time hardly felt any different. It did seem to take longer. He couldn't be entirely sure. Normally when he used the transporter he didn't have the time, or perhaps a reason, to think about the process of his body being disassembled on a molecular level. This time he couldn't shake the concern that some parts of him might not make the trip.

All his worries disappeared when he found himself in another transporter room with everything exactly where it belonged. He quickly made sure that his officers were with him as well.

"I don't appreciate that man's humor," Nora said, eliciting a small chuckle from Deen.

The transporter room they had materialized in was slightly smaller than the one they had departed from. It was also much darker here, just

bright enough to illuminate the room but not a bit more. A stark contrast to *Eagle*'s brightly lit interior.

"Welcome to Epsilon Twelve, I'm Lieutenant Commander Shelby Monroe, second-in-command."

Owens took stock of the commander. She was an attractive woman with dirty blonde hair, pulled back into a single ponytail that tightened her flawless skin, giving her a stern expression. There were slight bags under her eyes as if she hadn't had a good night's sleep in a while.

He thought that she appeared young for her rank and was sure he recognized the grit of a career officer in her eyes. He was quite certain that she didn't like being wasted on a seemingly inconsequential assignment on an outpost in the middle of nowhere. And yet she managed a firm smile on her lips.

"Thank you, Commander," Owens said and stepped down from the platform. His officers followed suit.

"Before we proceed, I'm afraid I have to ask you to surrender any weapons in your possession for security reasons. Our sensors have detected at least one of you carrying a phaser."

An awkward silence ensued as most of *Eagle*'s officers turned to look at the only member of the away team who might have decided to come to Epsilon Twelve armed.

Nora reluctantly withdrew the tiny phaser from a hidden pouch in her uniform.

Monroe stepped closer to the Bajoran security officer but Nora didn't seem to want to part with the weapon. "It shall be returned to you on your departure," she said and managed to keep that smile on her face. But the impatience in her voice was difficult to miss.

Nora shot him a quick look and he gave her an affirming nod. She handed the phaser over to the station's first officer.

"Thank you," Monroe said with little candor and passed it on to an armed security officer who was also in the transporter room. The blonde-haired woman turned back to her guests and showed momentary irritation.

"Another problem, Commander?" Owens said.

"I was under the impression Agent Tren would be arriving with you."

Owens kept a neutral expression on his face at the mention of Jana Tren. It wasn't easy. He had not been aware that she had also been invited to the dinner.

"In any case, if you and your officers would like to follow me, I'll take you directly to the room where you'll be having dinner with Captain Zalak."

"Certainly," Owens said, mirroring her smile and holding out his hand for her to show the way.

Monroe stepped out of the transporter room and made sure that all of the visitors followed her.

Owens quickly noticed the two heavily armed guards that were positioned just outside the transporter room. He exchanged a look with his equally surprised first officer.

Monroe in the meantime adopted a brisk pace through the corridors of the station. They seemed slightly wider than those on most starships. The reason for that, Owens assumed, was that the outpost had been built into the empty tunnels of the tritium mine that had occupied this space. The corridors were already beginning to fill with crates and containers from *Eagle*.

"Epsilon Twelve has seven levels. This is A level," Monroe said as they walked down the corridor. "I'll take you to G level, which is six levels down," she added and stepped into a turbo-lift.

The car was just large enough to hold all seven of them. But not very comfortably.

"G level," Monroe told the computer.

The lift set into motion with a low hum. It traveled much slower than its counterpart on *Eagle*.

"How deep are we going?" said Deen.

"About sixty-five meters."

The lift stopped, the doors opened, and Monroe darted out of the car.

The corridors on G level seemed even darker than the ones further up and the layout seemed almost maze-like. They made so many turns at seemingly indistinctive intersections that Owens truly marveled at Monroe's sense of direction.

The hallways on this level were less filled and Owens assumed that the crew hadn't had time yet to move the cargo to the lower decks. They encountered only a handful of Starfleet officers, most of whom were in the process of moving equipment into various rooms.

Deen slowed when she got a chance to spy into a room a crewmember had just stepped out of. Two men in what appeared to be lab coats seemed to be engaged in a heated debate, their voices were so loud that they echoed through the corridor.

As they spotted the curious visitor they quickly stopped their arguments in mid-sentence.

Monroe had stopped and turned to Deen who was still trying to spy into the open room. "Lieutenant, I would appreciate it if you would stay with the group so as not to disturb the crew's efforts to store the cargo," she said, her smile now gone.

The doors closed shut and Deen turned away. "Sorry," she said with an innocent shrug.

"We're almost there," said Monroe and continued. This time slower, however, making sure that *Eagle*'s officers would follow her closely.

"If they're so worried about us being here," Owens could hear Nora whisper to Edison, "why did they invite us in the first place?"

The first officer did not have an answer and didn't get a chance to think about it either as Monroe led them into a spacious and mostly unremarkable room.

It appeared to have no distinct purpose except for the large oval-sized table at its center. Numerous chairs were positioned around it and it was fully prepared for at least eight dinner guests. The plates, glasses, and cutlery seemed simple standard issue but it was the center of the table that held the real eye catcher. The long tray that ran down the entire length of the table contained several steamy hot foods of various textures and colors. Most of them were clearly from non-Earth regions. The room was filled with the sweet scent of all kinds of different spices.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to join you," Monroe said without the slightest tone of regret in her voice. "Captain Zalak will meet you momentarily but please don't hesitate to make yourselves comfortable."

"Thank you, Commander."

Monroe gave Owens a curt nod and then wasted no time to slip past him and out of the room.

"I did mention that outpost people are strange?" said Nora as she looked at the now-closed doors Monroe had just used.

"I don't care if they are completely insane," Hopkins said and approached the table. "Look at that," she reached for a fork picked up a small potato-sized vegetable from the tray, and quickly devoured it. She turned to the others with a wide smile on her face. "It's even better than it smells."

"It is considered polite to wait for the host before starting the meal," Edison said.

Hopkins quickly placed the fork back but couldn't manage to keep her eyes off the feast in front of her nose. "He better hurry up."

As if on cue, the doors opened to allow a tall Bolian to enter the room. Zalak's skin was a light blue and like all Bolians he had a prominent ridge running vertically along his bald head. His green eyes seemed to sparkle with energy and he wore an almost absurdly large smile on his dark blue lips. "Captain Owens," he said in a velvety tone of voice as he quickly reached out with both of his hands to shake Owens'. "It gives me great pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine, Captain," Owens said hoping that he wouldn't catch his lie. "Please meet my officer," he said and presented his senior staff. "Commander Edison, my right-hand man; Mister Xylion, science officer; Nora Laas, security; Louise Hopkins, our chief engineer, and last but assuredly not least, Lieutenant DeMara Deen."

Each officer offered a smile and a nod at his or her mention. The Vulcan limited himself to just the latter.

"A pleasure, a pleasure indeed," Zalak said, speaking quickly. "I wish my officers could join us but I'm afraid they're all quite busy at the moment. No wonder the way I work them," he said with a chuckle.

"Please, sit down," the Bolian continued. "All of you. This humble meal has been prepared to thank you personally for all your efforts."

Owens took a chair, Edison taking the one to his right while Deen sat to his left.

Hopkins pointed to a seat for Xylion to take. He nodded to her and sat down in the indicated chair. She could barely contain her smile as she sat next to him.

"Really, there is no need to thank us," Owens said. "We're just doing our part."

"Of course you are," Zalak said as he waited until everybody was seated before taking the chair opposite Owens'. "Nevertheless I hope you accept my thanks. All these foods you see before you have been personally selected by me and originate from my home world."

"Interesting," said Xylion as he began to help himself to a serving of a vegetable salad consisting of large, crimson-colored leaves. "I was not aware that *yernish* salad is a Bolian dish. I was under the assumption it originated on Andor."

"A common misconception, Mister Xylion. Just because Bolians and Andorians share the same color of skin doesn't mean we all eat the same food," he said and uttered another chuckle before returning his attention to *Eagle*'s commanding officer, "So, Captain, we don't get much news out here. I would just love it if you'd be able to indulge my curiosity about how things are going out there. Anything you have to share, really."

Nora uttered a heavy sigh and concentrated on filling her plate.

Owens showed more restraint and began to think of the best way to fulfill Zalaks' request without spending the next hour or so playing a game of twenty questions.



## VII – DISTURBANCE

Lif Culsten was starting to get used to the idea of trading in his post at the helm for the much more comfortable seat at the center of the bridge.

With most of the senior officers having left *Eagle*, he had been given temporary command of the ship. And while he cherished the opportunity to be in charge, he could not deny that it felt somewhat isolating sitting in the command area all by himself.

The bridge was not empty of course. Lance Stanmore was overseeing operations, Srena had the flight control console, and behind him, Trinik, the Vulcan beta-shift tactical officer kept a vigilant eye on *Eagle*'s defensive systems.

And yet this felt very different to commanding the night shift. This time no senior officer was available to take over at a moment's notice and he couldn't help but feel somewhat anxious about doing this without a safety net. He made sure not to show his anxiety. After all, this was his chance to prepare for what he hoped would one day be second nature to him. And captains did not get anxious when they sat in the center seat. Or at least they knew well how to hide such weaknesses from their crew.

The forward turbo-lift doors opened and Doctor Ashley Wenera strode onto the bridge, distracting him from his current train of thought.

"Doc?"

The raven-locked physician approached the command area at the center of the bridge.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?" he said and left his chair. Wenera didn't venture out of sickbay much and rarely made the trip up to the bridge.

She glanced at the viewscreen where she was rewarded with the sight of the crimson-colored planet *Eagle* was currently orbiting. "I just thought you might like some company up here," she said with a smile as she turned back to face him again.

He pointed at the chair to his left which was reserved for visiting officers just like the doctor. "I was under the impression you were working on a very sensitive experiment," he said as they both sat.

She grinned sheepishly.

"Don't tell me you only pretended to be working on an experiment to avoid having to join the others."

"Of course not," she said with feigned discomposure. "I'm still working on cultivating Alterian dry moss. It's just that I may have overestimated the personal attention the experiment would require."

"Overestimated?"

"Just by a bit," she said and then turned back to look at the large viewscreen. "With some spare time on my hands, I thought it would be a good idea to start getting more involved with ship operations."

He leaned back in his chair. "I don't think there's much to get involved with at the moment. We're not really doing anything."

But her enthusiasm was not restrained that easily. "What's our current status?" she said. When she realized how brisk her question had come out, she offered an apologetic look. "If you don't mind me asking?"

Culsten just smiled, taking no offense. On the contrary, he was quite amused. He knew that the good doctor was quite inquisitive by nature but he could not recall the last time she had shown any interest in ship operations. "All senior officers except for you are currently on Epsilon Twelve."

"From what I've heard Commander Leva didn't leave the ship either."

"Really?" he said, not having been briefed on that situation. "I heard something went down earlier today in the Nest."

She nodded. "He got into a heated argument with our Klingon guest. And they didn't argue just with words if you catch my drift. I've seen the outcome first hand," she said and shook her head. "Not pretty."

"I can't believe Leva would do that."

"Oh yes," she continued. "And from what I've been told, he instigated the whole thing. I can't imagine what's come over him."

"He hasn't been himself over the last few weeks," he said in a hushed tone and without looking at anyone in particular.

"In any case," she said. "Edison has relieved him of duty. We can only guess what will happen to him once he and the captain come back."

He nodded slowly. He couldn't claim that he was as close to the half-Romulan as somebody like Nora Laas but he did consider him a friend nevertheless. There weren't many people on *Eagle* he did not get along with. Culsten prided himself on his chameleon-like quality to blend in with whichever crowd he joined. He had spent plenty of time with Leva since they had started serving together and very little had ever given him reason to believe that he was capable of being easily provoked.

Wenera was ready to move on to a different subject. "How is the debarkation going?"

He needed a moment to shift his thoughts. "Slowly."

"Why is that?"

"Believe it or not, Agent Tren who has been overlooking the entire process is not allowing anyone other than the senior staff to even put one foot on that planet," he said gesturing at the viewscreen.

She followed his glance. "Any idea why?"

He shrugged. "Who knows what they're doing down there? All I know is that with the limitations she has put in place, we're going to be here a lot longer than we thought we would. Transporters are inefficient as well due to some form of interference and so we now rely almost entirely on the few cargo shuttles that have been cleared by Tren."

"It all sounds so very mysterious, doesn't it?" she said.

They exchanged a brief look of shared pain. Two years earlier the two of them had been involved in a mystery of their own and their attempts at trying to unravel it had led to disastrous consequences. He didn't like to be reminded of that episode and the look crossing her face gave proof that she didn't wish to linger on the subject either.

"It's different this time around," he said after a moment.

She gave him a puzzled expression.

"Even if we wanted to there's nobody around we could report to. At the moment we are the ultimate authority on this ship."

Srena who had clearly overheard some of their conversation swiveled her chair around to face her two superior officers. "Now that is a scary thought," she said with a sly grin.

\* \* \*

The ship's designation was United Starship *Eagle* and its registry read as NCC-74329. It was a Starfleet *Nebula*-class vessel and had been rated by intelligence as a level-four threat. And while Starfleet had officially classified the vessel a deep-space explorer, it was easily one of the Federation's most powerful weapon platforms, particularly in its present state, configured with a tactical pod on top of its large, elliptical saucer section, and as such posed a significant risk to Dominion supremacy.

It was without doubt a direct threat to the success of their mission and a thorn in Teleka'clan's side. The most frustrating part of this situation was the fact that the Federation starship was still entirely unaware of their presence as it sat vulnerably in the planet's orbit, entirely unprepared for an attack.

The Jem'Hadar warrior studied the gray vessels intently through his head-mounted viewer as if he could spot a weakness just by studying the ship's exterior. A weakness he knew wasn't necessary. He had at his disposal more than enough firepower to obliterate two *Nebula*-class ships. He itched at the chance to unleash that power and remove this unsightly sore. But he could do no such thing.

"What are the chances that the Federation ship will detect us?" Wegnour, the Vorta and mission commander wanted to know.

"Diminutive," he said. "To positively identify us they would need to initiate a high-power EM scan of our exact location. There is nothing in our history with the Federation that would support that they would initiate such a measure under the current circumstances."

The Vorta, who was the only other person in the command center to also wear the optical viewer over his eye that allowed him a visual external feed, nodded with satisfaction. "Good. Very good."

"However," Teleka'clan continued. "The longer the vessel remains in orbit the more the chances of us staying undetected will decrease."

"Naturally," Wegnour said with a dismissive hand gesture aimed at the commanding Jem'Hadar, demonstrating how little he respected the other man's concerns. Like most Vorta, he barely thought of the Jem'Hadar as men at all. As far as he was concerned, they were instruments, perfect for combat, the role for which they had been designed but entirely inadequate for anything beyond that specific function.

"If I may make a suggestion," Teleka'clan said, addressing the Vorta's back as Wegnor did not seem to deem it necessary to give his instrument any special attention. "We could easily engage and destroy the enemy vessel with a minimal chance of suffering significant damage."

"You do not understand the intricacies of this mission, First Teleka'clan. I do," he said and then decided to face the soldier, giving him a look not too far removed from that a parent would give to his young child, knowing that he would not be able to fully grasp sophisticated concepts. "There is a certain subtlety required here that is not compatible with your tiresomely obstinate ways."

Teleka'clan took a defiant step toward Wegnour, standing up straighter to give him a more imposing appearance. This had not been the first time he had been insulted by a Vorta but this one had made it a special point to continuously remind him of his superiority. Teleka'clan would never openly defy the Vorta or even consider the possibility of using violence to change his attitude. But he hoped that perhaps a show of strength would have Wegnour be more careful of his choice of words in the future.

Those hopes would prove to go unanswered when the Vorta began to snicker at the Jem'Hadar's attitude. He knew as well as Teleka'clan that the Jem'Hadar genetic make-up would never allow him to turn against him.

One of the soldiers operating a computer console turned to face Wegnour. "We have just detected transporter activity from the starship in orbit to the base on the surface. At least five life forms perhaps more."

The Vorta nodded slowly as if he had been awaiting this report. His self-satisfying smile disappeared. "First, prepare for stage one of the operation," he said but stopped before continuing. Something on his eye screen had startled him. He recomposed himself within seconds. "Clear the room."

Teleka'clan did not understand where this sudden transformation had come from as his own screen had not changed.

"Now," he said more urgently.

The Jem'Hadar First did not hesitate again. He gestured for his soldiers to leave. When he looked over his shoulder one more time, he found Wegnour standing entirely still as if he was trying hard to concentrate on what he was about to do. Teleka'clan was the last to leave the command center.

Wegnour turned slowly to make sure he was alone before he tapped a small control at the side of the tiny screen positioned in front of his eye.

The image changed to a person the Vorta immediately recognized. His entire body stiffened as he felt an enormous sense of bliss wash over him.

"Founder," he said with the reverence befitting a god. "Everything is as you have predicted. I stand ready to execute your every wish."

"It is essential that you do not target the Federation vessel until I give you the order."

“I understand.”

“Once I have what I require, destroy them.”

\* \* \*

“I really hope the current state of affairs is not as bleak as you have made it out to be,” Captain Zalak to his dinner companions.

Owens thought that he had spared the Bolian the worst news he had received relating to the Federation’s deteriorating war effort. He had tried hard not to directly imply what he knew in his heart to be true. The Federation was losing.

Zalak seemed poorly informed about what was happening at the far-removed front lines and it had been up to *Eagle*’s officers to bring him up to speed. He had eagerly absorbed all the information they were willing to provide.

“The Federation has endured much adversity since its founding,” Deen said as she wiped her mouth with a napkin. “No matter how discouraging and challenging our current situation, we have a great many bright, smart, and brave people all over the galaxy who will make sure that we’ll endure.”

Owens smiled at her optimism. He even felt somewhat envious of her can-do spirit. “It is in our nature to fight for survival, and to succeed,” he said, trying to mirror the sentiment.

Zalak nodded. “Survival should certainly be our priority. The question is by which means we’ll achieve it. From what I know about the

Dominion, they're not interested in genocide or acquiring more territory but in exercising control and bringing order and stability to the cosmos."

"You mean their order," said Nora.

"You said it yourself," Zalak said and looked at Deen. "The Federation has seen a lot of conflicts over the last centuries. So has the entire quadrant. Imagine a universe controlled by one central power. It would mean the end to conflict. An end to war."

"An interesting way to look at the issue," Xylion said and took a small sip from his beverage.

"Consider the way the Federation was founded. Bringing together and unifying a large number of entirely different worlds and people to form one powerful union."

"Your argument fails to take into consideration that the Federation is the result of a voluntary coalition. No wars were fought to bring its members together and no totalitarian power is exercised to maintain order. The Dominion on the other hand seems to believe that order can only be achieved by fear and violence," said Xylion.

Zalak raised a fork to emphasize his next point. "Well perhaps in that case we really have to choose between freedom and peace."

"Why is that always the choice?" said Louise Hopkins with a sheepish smile and picked up the last remaining red-colored peas from her plate. "Why can we not have both in equal measure?"

Edison couldn't suppress a chuckle.

The loud hissing sound of the heavy doors parting interrupted the conversation. All heads turned to see Jana Tren enter the room. She had exchanged her business suit for a more utilitarian jumpsuit. Owens couldn't help but notice how well it hugged her curves. He knew he could

not allow himself those thoughts, especially considering Tren's telepathic abilities. He tried to force them out of his head and quickly left his seat. The other male officers followed suit.

"Ah, Agent Tren, I presume," Zalak said and began to approach the Betazoid. "I've been so looking forward to meeting you." He took her hand and shook it slightly.

"Captain Zalak, a pleasure meeting you at last. I would have come sooner but work has been murder," she said with what Owens could clearly tell was not an honest smile.

He didn't appreciate how friendly Zalak appeared to be and how much attention he seemed to be giving her. Part of him wanted to jump over the table and separate him from the woman he still felt so strongly about. It was a very small and immature part, of course, or at least that was what he told himself.

"All the more reason for you to take a seat and join us. I'm sure you could use the break," Zalak said and pointed at an empty chair next to his.

"Thank you, Captain," she said and approached the dinner table.

"I assume you have met the valiant crew of the starship *Eagle*," Zalak said, following her.

Tren locked eyes with Owens. He held the look just a moment too long and she quickly redirected her focus to the other officers and gave them a small smile. "We have met," she said and sat at the table. "I didn't get a chance to express my gratitude for the services you have provided. Hopefully, the disembarkation will be completed soon and we'll be able to release you."

Owens and his officers sat again. "As I told Captain Zalak, there is no need to thank us for doing our job."

Tren nodded and turned to the remaining food, trying to decide which ones to sample. In the end, she went for nothing more than a simple salad and water.

Zalak had placed himself next to her. "We were just having a very stimulating conversation about the war and the very future of the Federation."

She nodded. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Not at all," he said. "Perhaps we could get your view on current affairs."

Tren seemed to consider the question for a moment. She didn't realize that Owens was watching her intently. "I believe if we want to win this war it might become necessary to look at less conventional means to achieve victory."

Deen frowned. "What means do you have in mind, if I may ask?"

Tren took a drink of water. "Whichever necessary, Lieutenant. Certainly, the Dominion doesn't hesitate to do the same."

Nora nodded. "We have to align our strategies to the enemy we face. And this may be the toughest one we've ever fought. We knew we wouldn't get rid of the Cardassians on Bajor by fighting fair."

"There are lines we have to be mindful of, no matter what enemy we fight. Certain values define who we are that we must cling to no matter what we do," Owens said. "*Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster himself.*"

Zalak's smile widened. "Yes, one of your famously delightful human philosophers, I believe. Schopenhauer?"

"Nietzsche," said Owens.

"The point is this," Tren said without looking at anyone in particular. "This was we're fighting now? We cannot fight it like we have fought wars in the past and expect to win it. And if we cannot win this one, we lose everything, including our precious values. So in my eyes, if it's between survival and holding on to a set of notions and ideas, well that's not really a choice at all."

Owens eyed her suspiciously. It wasn't just because he disagreed with her point of view but even more so because he had never heard her talk like that before. The Jana Tren he remembered had been an idealist, even more so than he.

"What good are our values if there's nobody left to uphold them?" Zalak said.

"What good is survival if it turns us all into the very monsters we tried so hard to defeat?" said Deen.

The ensuing silence proved that the conversation had reached an impasse.

A sudden tremor shook the room, causing the silverware and glasses on the table to rattle and the lights in the room to flicker. It ended as quickly as it had started.

Nora had jumped onto her feet as soon as it had started. "What was that?"

Zalak also stood. "We've been having a few problems with the power generators lately," he said calmly. "It's nothing serious but I'll go and have a look just in case." He turned for the exit. "I'll be back shortly. Wouldn't want to miss out on this stimulating flow of ideas we've engaged in," he added just before he left the room.

Owens didn't miss the concern in Tren's eyes. He got up, rounded the table, and sat next to her. "Are you all right?"

For a fleeting moment, she looked very much like the young woman he had known back in the day and he had a desperate urge to hold her again. Her expression hardened and the moment passed. "Something is wrong," she said quietly.

Owens considered the doors. "I know. The good captain is a bit of a character. But I guess that's what you get when you're stationed at the far corner of the galaxy for too long."

A small smile crept onto her lips as though she sensed the true nature of his dislike for Zalak. She shook her head. "It's not that."

"Then what?"

"I should've been informed about any problems with the generators."

There was another tremor, this one stronger than the one before. Some of the glasses toppled over. The lights flickered again but this time they did not come back on.

"This is not right," Nora said as the room had become pitch dark.

"Everybody remain calm," said Edison.

"Emergency lighting should—" Hopkins didn't get to finish her sentence as the auxiliary illumination system kicked in, bringing back some light to the room. The crimson-hued glow gave their surroundings a strangely eerie appearance.

Tren stood and within seconds nobody remained in their chairs. She tapped her combadge. "Tren to Captain Zalak."

There was no response.

Owens tried his. "Away team to *Eagle*, come in."

Again nothing.

The captain looked at his officers. "Could a power disruption cause us to lose contact with *Eagle*?"

"The surface does emanate low-level radiation that may interfere with communications," Xylion said. "Without the station's power to amplify com signals, we may be experiencing communication blackouts."

Owens turned to Tren and something in her dark eyes told him that she wasn't all too convinced by that answer.

"If I had a tricorder," Xylion said, "I might be able to offer a more comprehensive analysis."

"Well, we don't have any tricorders," Edison said.

"Or weapons," Nora added and headed for the doors only to find that they refused to move for her. "Great," she said and turned to the others. "We're trapped. I'm starting to get a really bad feeling about this."

"We need to get to the control room, *now*," Tren said and joined Nora by the door. She removed a panel and began working on the manual override. She was having little success.

"What do you think is going on?" he asked her.

She cursed under her breath when the doors wouldn't bulge. "I haven't got the faintest idea," she said without interrupting her attempts. "But I'd feel much better once we get to the control room," she added and then looked at Owens. "Can you get this door open?"

He in turn looked at his chief engineer.

"I'm on it," said Hopkins and went to work.

\* \* \*

"Shuttlebay two to bridge."

It took Culsten a second to realize that it was up to him to answer the call that came over the speakers on the bridge.

"This is the bridge, go ahead," he said, making an effort to sound as official as he could.

"We seem to be having a situation down here."

"What is it?" he said, quickly wishing he had phrased that differently.

"Who am I talking to up there?" the disembodied voice asked with slight irritation.

"This is Lieutenant Culsten, in *command*," he said, making sure to put a special emphasis on the last word.

"Oh," was the man's voice-only reply but then quickly added. "Sorry, sir. The last shuttle from Epsilon Twelve is fifteen minutes overdue. All attempts to contact it have failed."

He tried to sort his thoughts, tried to think of what he needed to do in a situation like this and in which order. "Thanks for the report. Bridge out."

Wenera who had relocated to the environmental controls station in the aft section of the bridge earlier strode back down the ramp and to the center of the bridge to join him. "What's going on?"

He shrugged. "Lieutenant Culsten to Captain Owens."

There was no response.

"*Eagle* to away team, please come in," he said and caught himself holding his breath while he awaited an answer that never came.

He turned to Trinik, standing at his post at the tactical station. "Lieutenant, please try to hail the outpost."

He nodded curtly and began to operate his console. A discouraging tone from the station told him that he didn't have any luck either. "No response."

"Keep trying," Culsten said and then stepped up to the operations console. He could feel his heartbeat pounding slightly faster in his chest. "Lance, sensors?"

Stanmore, apparently having anticipated the order, was already reading his instruments. "I cannot see anything out of the ordinary. I'm still detecting the outpost and numerous life signs. No, wait," he stopped himself as new information began scrolling across his screen. "The trithium radiation levels have more than tripled."

"What?" He couldn't believe it. "Bridge to transporter room one. Lock onto our people on the surface and beam them back onboard."

For a moment there was nothing but silence.

"Bridge this is Chief Chow. I cannot establish a lock amidst the interference."

"The radiation levels are now five hundred percent above normal," Stanmore said. "I'm losing sensor contact."

Culsten rubbed the palms of his suddenly sweaty hands against his pants before he turned to look at the doctor, still standing behind him.

"The good news is that trithium radiation, even at those levels, is unlikely to be fatal. But I do suggest that we don't keep them down there for too long."

He nodded and slowly moved back to sit in the chair at the center of the bridge. He needed a moment to think. Without sensors, there was no way to tell what was happening on the outpost and he could not beam the away team out or establish communications with anyone on the surface. His options were severely limited.

Wenera sat next to him and slightly leaned over. "In a situation like this, I don't think it would be inappropriate for the commanding officer to ask his crew for help."

He looked at her for a moment and then nodded slowly. He cleared his throat. "Does anyone have any suggestions?"

Srena, sitting at the helm, spoke up first. "What if we decreased our orbit? Would that improve our chances of reestablishing a transporter lock on the away team?"

Stanmore shook his head. "It is not a matter of distance but intensity," he said. "With the current radiation levels, we wouldn't be able to maintain a stable lock even if we hovered ten meters above the target."

"It may be possible to boost sensors and transporter emitters to compensate for the radiation," Trinik said.

"The power we would need to do that," said Stanmore, "would fry every single circuitry on this ship."

"If we can't boost our systems," said Culsten, "is there anything we can do to weaken the radiation from our end?"

Stanmore seemed to consider that for a moment. "We could attempt to bombard the surface with high-charged photon particles. In theory that

would temporarily lower the effects of tritium radiation. But that could take hours."

Culsten nodded. "At the moment it seems to be our best bet. Get started."

Stanmore acknowledged with a curt nod and stood to head to the aft science station to begin the necessary modifications to initiate the bombardment.

"It occurs to me that there is one other person on board we might be able to turn to for help," Wenera said.

He knew instantly who she was referring to.

\* \* \*

"I'm really having a bad feeling about this," Nora Laas said. She had her arms folded in front of her chest while she watched Louise Hopkins on her knees in front of an access panel next to the door. She had been working for the last five minutes on trying to get the heavy panels to move to allow them to leave the dining room.

Deen stepped up next to the Bajoran security officer. "You already said that."

Nora shot her a sideward glance. "The feeling is getting worse," she said and turned back towards the doors. "Is this supposed to take this long?"

Hopkins didn't turn. "The mechanism seems to have short-circuited when the black-out occurred. It locked the doors in place."

"Aren't the doors supposed to unlock when this happens?"

Hopkins shrugged. "This outpost might have different security measures in place."

Edison who had been listening in on the conversation gave Tren a suspicious look. "That wouldn't surprise me at all."

Tren didn't seem to pay much attention to *Eagle's* first officer. Instead, she kept her eyes intently focused on Hopkins' efforts to circumvent the door mechanism.

Owens couldn't shake the feeling that Nora was absolutely correct. Something was obviously not right here. The events of the past few minutes had been too convenient to be coincidence. He couldn't help but beginning to regret his now seemingly careless decision to bring his entire senior staff to an unfamiliar outpost. "Can I have a word with you?" he said as he walked closely past Tren, making it obvious that he wished for her to follow him.

She did and he led her to the far corner of the room.

"Your officers don't like me very much, do they?" she said once she was sure they were out of earshot of the others.

Owens knew it wasn't a question. She was Betazoid and even a non-telepath would have been able to pick up the tension between her and some of his officers. "Can you blame them?"

"I guess not."

"I need to know what's happening here."

She glanced back at the door which was keeping them trapped in the dining room. "I know as much as you do."

"I doubt that very much."

Tren took a step closer to him. "Worst case scenario," she said in a quiet, almost foreboding tone of voice. "We're going to be in big trouble. Especially now that I don't have my people with me."

"The mission specialists?" he said as he remembered the unusual cargo that had never made it onto *Eagle*. "Who were they? Soldiers?"

Her expression was answer enough. He had made that connection earlier when he had realized that part of the cargo *Eagle* had received contained enough weapons and armor to outfit an entire battalion.

"Captain," the first officer's voice was strained with urgency.

Owens and Tren whipped around and quickly found Edison's source of anxiety. A cream-colored gas had begun to noiselessly stream into the room from the ventilation system.

Xylon confirmed everybody's fears. "It is anesthizine gas," he said calmly. "It will take effect within a matter of seconds."

"Somebody is trying to neutralize us," Nora said.

Owens hurried back to the door. "Lieutenant, we need to get out, now."

"One minute," she said tersely, her forehead now moist from perspiration.

"We don't have a minute," he said.

Nora rushed to the table, quickly collected all napkins she could find, and soaked them into pitchers of water. Then she quickly distributed the wet pieces of cloth among the people in the room. "Keep that in front of your mouth and nose," she said as she handed them out. "It will buy us some time."

A static shock shot through the circuitry Hopkins had been manipulating and she painfully retracted her hands. "Damn."

The two door panels moved. No more than a few centimeters. Not nearly enough room to allow escape.

Xylion and Edison quickly moved to the door, grabbed the edges of the panels, and pulled them open until there was just enough space for a body to pass through.

Owens nodded to his officers and without another moment of deliberation, one by one made their way through the gap and into the corridor beyond.

To their dismay, they found the hallways much in the same shape as the dining room. Here too crimson-colored emergency beacons provided illumination. A station crewmember came stumbling around the corner only to collapse moments later.

"We've got gas here as well," Nora said and couldn't suppress a coughing fit even with the wet napkin pressed against her face.

"It's all over the station," Tren said. "There should be a Jeffries tube access just a few meters down the corridor. There won't be any gas in there."

"Go," Owens said and gestured for Tren to show the way and then followed.

Tren found the hatch and opened it. Owens was directly behind her and practically shoved her into the opening. His eyes were burning and beginning to tear up. He could make out Deen and Edison following him but wasn't able to see beyond that.

Edison helped Deen into the small hatch and then tried to turn back to make sure the others got in. He had lost the napkin and could hardly

contain his coughing. Nora, disregarding rank and protocol, reached out for him and held him back firmly, preventing him from going back.

"I need to get the others," he said in between coughs.

But she didn't let go. "They're coming."

Hopkins had stumbled to the ground when she had come out of the dining room. Her makeshift mask was gone and she could not find it through her tear-filled eyes. She had lost all sense of direction as tried to get back on her feet but could not tell which way the others had gone. It was then that she noticed the tall figure standing beside her. Panic gripped her for a moment until she recognized his face. It was Xylion. He reached out for her without making so much as eye contact and pushed her in the right direction.

The gas had begun to form a thick red mist in the corridor that made it difficult to see anything beyond a few meters.

When Edison spotted both Xylion and Hopkins approach the hatch he gave in to Nora and entered the Jeffries tube. Hopkins was next. Nora who had apparently made up her mind to be last could no longer control her coughing and was beginning to sag to the floor. Xylion made sure that she got in before he climbed into the narrow hatch and closed it behind him.

## VIII – CONTACT

Life truly worked in strangely mysterious ways, So'Dan Leva thought. Could it truly be nothing more than coincidence that he had been suspended from duty and left on the ship while all senior officers had beamed onto the planet only to suddenly disappear?

Wasn't it peculiar, he wondered, that the one person whose help was now requested was the one person who had been ordered not to leave his quarters until the return of the now missing captain and first officer? There were some who believed that the universe had a way of unfolding exactly how it should, that every cause and consequence happened for a particular reason which often remained hidden from the casual observer. Leva did not prescribe to that belief.

"What exactly do you want me to do?" he said to the younger officer who had asked him to come to the briefing room. He had not been told what the meeting was about, only that Culsten was currently in charge of the ship and that there was a problem with the away team. He had quickly figured that things had to be pretty bad. A feeling that was fully confirmed when he met both Culsten and Doctor Wenera in the observation lounge. They had decided to present a unified front – a helmsman and a physician – to speak to the ship's only remaining command-level crewmember.

Culsten didn't have an answer. Clearly, he had imagined the meeting to be much less difficult. After all, he counted the half-Romulan as a friend and he had hoped that once he had explained their situation, he would simply know the right answers, spring into action, and take on some of the responsibilities that at the moment rested solely on his shoulders. But the tactical officer's attitude had been anything but helpful so far. He was upset and angry, that much was obvious, and Culsten could sympathize to some degree. But their current situation seemed much more critical than

whatever problems Leva was working through presently, Culsten was sure of that.

Ashley Wenera decided to field the question after Culsten didn't speak. "We need your help. Any suggestions you might have."

Leva seemed to consider that for a moment. "I'm suspended from duty. I shouldn't even be outside my quarters."

Wenera shot Culsten a quick look. She wasn't sure how to reply to this.

"I'm the acting commanding officer," Culsten said. "Surely I must have the authority to ask for your help in this matter."

"Did you check regulations?"

Wenera took a deep breath. "You want us to look up regulations while the captain and the away team could be in serious danger? We have to act quickly. Are you going to help us or not?"

He gave the doctor an icy stare as if he didn't appreciate her tone. "I don't see how I can help you as long as I am suspended from -"

"Fine, consider yourself reinstated then," Culsten said.

Leva looked at the helmsman. It was not a line he had ever imagined hearing from a junior lieutenant. But then again, the events of the last few days had been nothing but ordinary.

"What else do you want?" Culsten said. "Command? Take it. Trust me I don't want it."

Leva cracked a smile that only helped to irritate the helmsman more. He was well aware that Culsten had ambitions to have his own command someday. He knew he would still have much to learn before that day would come. Leva on the other hand had never really entertained similar

ambitions. "There are some things in life we do not choose, Lif, and this is certainly one of them. You've always wanted the responsibility and now you've got it. You just have to learn to deal with it. As far as this situation is concerned, I suggest you ask Major Wasco. He has a crack unit of marines under his command that can be rapidly deployed under almost any given situation."

Neither Culsten nor Wenera had considered that option. It wasn't entirely surprising really. Starfleet ships rarely carried marines on board and few officers knew exactly how and when to make use of their special capabilities. *Eagle* had taken onboard Wasco and his men less than a month ago and thankfully there hadn't been many opportunities to test their unique skills.

"The marines?" Wenera said as if she had never even heard the term before. She was aware that they had come on board and that they occupied a large part of deck seventeen where they spent most of their time. They didn't mix much with the Starfleet crew, probably because they were too busy going through combat drills or whatever other rituals prepared them for battle.

Leva nodded and stood. "Speak to Wasco. I'm sure they have a contingency plan for just this kind of situation," he said and turned to the exit. "Good luck."

Culsten jumped to his feet. "What about you?"

"As far as I'm concerned, I'm still suspended until either Commander Edison or the captain say otherwise," he said without halting.

"I'd rather have you join the rescue team," Culsten said. He couldn't quite get himself to entirely rely on the Marines. Not because he doubted their abilities but because he barely knew anything about them. He wanted somebody who he knew and trusted on the team to save the captain.

Leva shrugged. "Just because you're in command doesn't mean you always get what you want," he said. "Consider that another piece of advice," he added just before he stepped out of the room.

Wenera glanced at Culsten who looked clearly disappointed by the outcome of the meeting. "I know this could have gone better but at least now there is a plan."

He nodded. "We better get started. We already lost enough time."

"We?" she said with a wide smile. "Didn't you hear Leva? You're the man calling the shots around here now."

"Please don't you start as well," he said as they both left the observation lounge. Right then and there Culsten knew that his first command was well on its way to become an uphill battle until the bitter end.

\* \* \*

One thousand three hundred and sixteen. That was the exact number of rungs they had climbed to get from where they had been to where they were now. Nora had counted every single one of them. The journey had taken them forty-three minutes, at least ten times longer than it would have taken by turbo-lift. She hadn't minded much, in fact, she appreciated the workout, it kept her mind sharp and she knew she would have to keep all her focus under the circumstances. Not all members of their party could say the same, however.

Besides her only Xylion showed little signs of fatigue. The others were all in various stages of exhaustion. Hopkins and Deen had both collapsed onto the floor of the maintenance hub they had arrived in and

Edison and Owens were breathing hard, half leaning against the wall. Jana Tren, the Betazoid, seemed to fight the urge to do the same but sweat was covering most of her face.

"I'm starting to regret that extra portion of Bolian jelly dessert," Hopkins said as she removed her uniform jacket and dropped it onto the floor next to her.

Deen agreed. "I don't think that dinner prepared any of us for this."

"To think that I actually looked forward to coming here," the chief engineer mumbled.

Jana Tren looked over the worn-out Starfleet officers before turning to Owens. "We cannot afford to sit here. We have to get to the control center."

He regarded her as if she had just lost her mind. The last thing his body wanted to do was to move again. But he was unable to ignore the concern in her eyes. He knew she was right. Their priority had to be to find out what had happened and reestablish communications with his ship. He nodded slowly and took a reaffirming step away from the wall, his strained muscles quickly punishing him for that move.

Edison noticed his captain's intent and followed suit. He turned to *Eagle*'s officers. "All right people, let's get ready to move out. Contrary to popular belief, we're not here for a picnic."

Hopkins groaned. "Great, now you sound just like my drill instructor at the Academy," she said as she worked herself back onto her feet.

"If we take this Jeffries tube," Jana said and pointed to one of the many intersecting maintenance shafts, "we should come out close to the control centers' main entrance."

Owens nodded and looked at his security chief.

"I've got point," she said as she made her way toward the shaft. She slowed as she passed by Edison. "I happen to like drill instructors," she said very softly before she stepped head-first into the Jeffries tube.

The others followed.

They didn't have to go far. When they stepped out of the constricting shaft and set foot onto the much wider corridor again, they found that the gas had almost entirely cleared. The persistent smell still lingered in the air and its sharp taste gave proof that this section had also been flooded. Main power had not been restored, leaving the corridors in a ghostly red glow.

Deen spotted an unconscious crewmember and quickly dropped to his side to check his vital signs. She looked up at Owens. "He's alive."

The captain turned to Jana. "What's happening here?"

"The gas is supposed to be part of a station-wide defensive system triggered in case of attack," she said. "I do not understand why it has been released on us."

"Let's find that control center and get some answer," Owens said.

"It's not very far," said Tren and began to lead the way.

They walked down mostly empty corridors, coming across a handful of unconscious crewmembers on their way. They didn't have the time to check on them all.

After a two-minute power walk and just before Jana Tren was about to round another corner, she was stopped by a gentle hand on her shoulder. She looked around to see that it belonged to the strawberry-blond Bajoran. Her facial expression was dead serious as the security officer gestured for her to be quiet.

Irritated the Betazoid looked at Owens for answers. Like all the others he had stopped as well and kept his eyes on Nora as she sneaked up noiselessly toward the edge of the corridor. With her back pressed flat against the wall, she ventured a careful look around the corner.

"What's going on?" Tren said after she had approached the captain.  
"What's happening?"

"Trouble," Edison replied for Owens.

"Laas has somewhat of a sixth sense when it comes to this. Let's let her do her job," Owens said softly.

Tren nodded slowly and then turned back to look at the Bajoran officer.

Not a moment later the security officer turned back to face the waiting party. She raised one hand and began to communicate her report with gestures. A technique she was an expert at; first learned during guerilla warfare on Bajor and later perfected as a marine.

Owens wasn't as skilled at signaling as his security chief but Edison understood instantly. "Three hostiles, less than two hundred meters," he said.

Tren's eyes widened in horror. "Hostiles? What kind of hostiles?" she blurted slightly louder than was appropriate for the situation.

Nora shot her an icy stare.

Owens grabbed Tren and moved her away from the corner, gesturing his other officers around him to follow as well. They retreated just far enough to be out of potential earshot of the enemy but still within visual range of Nora who had kept her look-out position.

"Whoever they are," Edison said and mirrored Nora's chastising glance at Tren, "we cannot engage three armed hostiles without weapons."

Owens seemed lost in thought and not listening to the conversation happening around her.

Commander Xylion decided to answer for her. "We have to assume that the enemy has taken the control room. I suggest we withdraw from this level until we can establish the precise number and position of the enemy."

"I agree with Xylion," Edison said.

Owens looked at the Federation agent. "Jana?"

She was still not paying attention.

*Goddamnit Jana, this is not the time zone out.* His thought boomed through his mind with such force that the Betazoid had little difficulty to sense its intensity.

Almost as if slapped in the face, she came out of her reverie and looked angrily at Owens. "There is an auxiliary control room two levels below. If main control is compromised it is imperative that we get there instead."

"What makes you think the enemy has not already occupied that as well?" Edison said.

She shook her head. "Unlikely. It was conceived for just such an event. Nobody knows about it but me," she said quickly and then faced Owens again. "I cannot stress how important it is that we get there quickly."

Before the captain could speak, he was interrupted by his first officer. "Sir," he said and directed his attention back to Nora.

She was giving another signal, waving her hand in front of her eyes as if she couldn't see. Owens understood instantly this time. She had lost visual contact with the enemy.

Edison said what everyone was already assuming. "It's an ambush."

"We need to move, now," Owens said and turned to Xylion. "Commander, take Tren and the lieutenants and reassemble in the maintenance hub."

"Wait a minute, what about you?" Tren said.

"Commander, now!"

Xylion pushed the Betazoid forcefully back down the corridor, giving her no more chances to object to the captain's decision. Deen and Hopkins followed closely.

"Sir, I must agree with Agent Tren. You should go as well," Edison said as he watched the foursome's hasty departure.

Owens allowed himself a small smile. "I didn't think you and Jana would see eye to eye on anything."

"Your safety is always –"

The captain cut him off. "Gene, we don't have time for this, the odds are already against us," he said and headed toward Nora, his first officer staying close at his side. "We need to buy our people some time to get out of here."

Nora spotted Owens and Edison heading her way and instantly cursed their decision, not wanting either of them to be in harm's way. Not because they were poor fighters—she knew for a fact they could both handle themselves in combat—but because the captain and the first officer were the two most valuable elements of the team. She didn't like to

prioritize lives but she had come to learn that it was a necessity when engaged in battle. Michael Owens was her captain and she would give her life to protect him and Eugene Edison, she wanted alive for an entirely different reason.

The sudden whirl in the air in front of her caught her utterly by surprise as she contemplated fighting side-by-side with the man she loved. She had been distracted just a few seconds and it had been enough. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a figure materializing out of thin air. Something struck out for her and a powerful blow connected with her stomach.

The gray-skinned Jem'Hadar had used the blunt end of his *kar'takin* —a short polearm—to deliver the first blow. This had been a mistake. While Nora doubled over in pain she was still aware enough of the next strike. She reached out just in time to catch the weapon's upper handle and stopped the razor-sharp blade mere centimeters from dissecting her head. She was currently no match for the Jem'Hadar soldier, however, her strength was fading quickly and the blade was inching closer. She had merely bought herself a few seconds.

Enough time as it soon turned out. Edison tackled the Jem'Hadar to the ground causing the warrior to lose his grip on the melee weapon.

"Are you all right?" Owens said as he arrived by her side just a moment after Edison.

Nora nodded slowly, still visibly in pain. She wanted to respond, say that she was just fine and that he should get the hell out while he still could, but she didn't get the chance. She pushed Owens aside, lowered her shoulder, and bulldozed forward and into the midsection of another Jem'Hadar who had only just materialized.

The first soldier who had been thrown to the floor by Edison wrapped his fingers around his polaron pistol and brought it up to fire it

point-blank at the first officer. Owens saw this and without delay slapped the weapon out of the soldier's hand.

Encouraged by initial success, Owens pushed the offensive, attempting to deliver another blow, this one aimed at his head.

The Jem'Hadar was faster, intercepted his arm, and with his superior strength twisted him around and smashed him hard against the bulkhead.

Edison went straight towards the clear plastic tube sticking out of the Jem'Hadar's jugular, feeding his brain the vital ketracel-white drug which all of his species required to live.

But the move was easily predicted as well and the Jem'Hadar used the opportunity to reach out for Edison's chest, finding purchase grabbing his uniform and the flesh beneath it, he began to squeeze with all his might just where Edison's heart was located.

Edison's eyes widened as he felt the sudden pressure build-up in his chest. The pain was intolerable and he felt his entire body starting to go limp.

And then the pressure was gone. He heard a gurgling sound followed by silence.

Nora knelt by the Jem'Hadar's head. Grasped firmly in her hand was a large steak knife that was now buried to the hilt in the soldier's throat. Edison slowly turned his head to look at the other Jem'Hadar Nora had engaged moments earlier. He sat collapsed against the wall with a deep bloody cut across his neck.

When he glanced back at Nora, he watched as she slowly removed the blade out of the Jem'Hadar's gullet. He fought the sense of disgust threatening to overwhelm him when he realized that he had used that exact same knife to cut a large slice of turkey breast earlier.

Owens stumbled back onto his feet. "Is everybody all right?" he said as he steadied himself against the wall, still feeling his head spinning slightly from being smashed into the wall moments earlier.

Nora nodded but kept her eyes on Edison as if to tell him how foolish he had been for trying to help her. She cleaned the blood-soaked knife on the Jem'Hadar's uniform and then helped Edison onto his feet.

"We're fine. But there was a third one," Edison said slowly and began to gently massage his chest. It still felt as if the Jem'Hadar had torn right through flesh and bone.

"I don't think it's smart to stay here and wait for another attack," Nora said quickly. "We should rejoin the others."

"Agreed," the captain said and grabbed the hand Nora offered him. The hallway refused to stop spinning. "I won't be able to move fast though."

Edison stepped next to the captain to steady him as they proceeded down the corridor.

Xylion, Tren, Deen, and Hopkins had almost reached the Jeffries tube access they had come out of earlier when Tren stopped dead in her tracks. Her face turned into a grimace.

Hopkins looked back. "What's wrong?"

"They're fighting," she said. "They're in pain."

The others had stopped as well. Deen looked at the Betazoid and then at Xylion. "We should go back and help them."

"We have our orders."

"We can't just leave them," she barked angrily.

Xylion did not react to the sudden emotional outburst. He held her insisting look for a few moments before he turned around to look back in the direction from which they had come.

Hopkins stepped up next to her. "Dee?"

Deen looked at the engineer and Hopkins was certain that she could see something in her eyes she had never seen there before. While she understood that Deen was not a physical fighter she had witnessed this once seemingly delicate girl transformed into a woman of courage. Courage she knew she lacked. Right now, however, all that courage seemed gone and replaced by something else. Fear. And not for her own wellbeing.

"We should keep going," she said softly not at all proud of the words coming over her lips.

Tren nodded. "She's right," she said after a moment's worth of contemplation. "It's imperative that we get to the auxiliary control room."

Deen threw her an angry look. She wanted to yell at her. How dare she ask to abandon him? The one person who had stood by her side when nobody else would. The only person who seemed to have trusted her. And what had she done with that trust? She had led them into a deadly trap with little chance of survival. And now she was more than willing to make Michael Owens their first casualty.

Tren felt the spite coming from Deen and broke eye contact. "Commander Xylion, are you coming?"

But the Vulcan was still turned away from them, spying into the empty distance. "Go ahead I shall follow shortly."

"What's wrong?" Hopkins said.

"We are being followed," he said. "Go now."

The three women rushed for the Jeffries tube access hatch not far down the corridor.

Xylion could feel a presence. He could smell a distinct odor and then moments after it had appeared he sensed a faint breath of air against his skin. He whipped around as he realized that his enemy had just passed by him.

The three women were just in the process of opening the hatch when the Jem'Hadar un-shrouded directly above them. He reached out for Deen's shoulder and yanked her backward. He ignored Hopkins and instead grasped Tren's throat, lifting her off the ground.

Hopkins charged the Jem'Hadar to free Tren out of his deadly grip but didn't even notice the hand that struck out for her head. The blow was forceful enough to send her tumbling to the floor.

Tren dangled in the air as the Jem'Hadar soldier held her tightly by her neck. She tried to land a kick against his legs but remained entirely unsuccessful.

The reptile-faced Jem'Hadar cocked his head with recognition. "Jana Tren, special agent in service of the United Federation of Planets. You will accompany me without resistance."

"I rather die before I go anywhere with you."

"That is not an option."

The Jem'Hadar seemed to sense somebody behind him but before he could turn he felt a hand on his neck, applying pressure to a very specific

spot. He slightly turned his head to see the Vulcan behind him. "I am not susceptible to this form of attack. Surrender now and you may not be -"

Xylion shifted all his strength into his firm grip, resulting in a sickening crunch. The Jem'Hadar collapsed to the floor taking Tren with him.

"Every neck can be broken," Xylion said dryly as he looked down at the now-lifeless enemy.

Tren pushed herself frantically away from the dead Jem'Hadar, breaking out into labored breathing.

Xylion in the meantime checked on Hopkins and Deen, finding both of them bruised but without any major injuries.

Moments later Owens, Edison, and Nora joined the scene. Owens spotted the lifeless enemy and Tren tending to her throat with a look of panic still written all over her face. He quickly knelt next to her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded but didn't speak.

Xylion turned to the captain. "I recommend that we leave this level at once."

Owens helped Tren up from the floor. "Are you able to show us the way to the auxiliary control room?"

She nodded, opened the hatch, and climbed inside without saying a single word.

Owens threw a glance at Deen. Something in her look told him that more had happened here than a Jem'Hadar attack but there was no time to consider this now.

"I'm glad you're all right," she said and then entered the hatch with the others following close behind.

\* \* \*

So'Dan Leva was a big enough man to admit when he had made a mistake, if not to anyone else then at least to himself. After returning to his quarters from his meeting with Culsten and Wenera he had come to the conclusion that he had done nothing but tend to his own bruised ego. He still felt humiliated for having been suspended from duty and practically placed under room arrest that he had not even considered trying to be helpful to anyone, especially not a junior lieutenant who possessed less than half the experience he had.

He had come to regret his attitude toward Culsten and Wenera. They had been placed into an impossible position and he had given them the cold shoulder, abandoning their desperate attempt to save *Eagle*'s crew from whatever danger they were facing on the planet below. And then there was another issue that factored heavily into reconsidering a more proactive role.

Self-preservation. Any rescue attempt into an unknown situation carried with it implications of great personal danger but if he did nothing, if he decided to stay onboard and be uncooperative, the consequences might far outweigh the possible risks. His career would be further stained by disgrace, and considering his current situation, he was not willing to further enable his own downfall.

About twenty minutes after his meeting with Culsten, Leva entered the main shuttle bay and to his relief discovered that the rescue team had not yet departed the ship.

About a dozen men and women stood lined up on the spacious shuttle deck. Each of them at parade rest and differently from Starfleet crewmembers, they were dressed in green and black combat fatigues. Unlike their colleagues, they had no shiny combadges or rank pins attached to their uniforms. Instead, all their insignia was dark and inconspicuous. The Marines were armed with large combat knives, phaser pistols that looked nothing like their Starfleet counterparts, and black compression rifles.

Leva spotted Lif Culsten speaking to a tall, dark-haired man who stood apart from the other marines. As he approached he noticed that it was the other man who seemed to be doing most of the talking. The imposing officer possessed an undeniably muscular physique that spoke to a well-trained body. It wasn't just his muscles that gave him an aura of authority and confidence. The shorter silver-haired Culsten seemed to shrink away from the marine commander.

When the acting captain spotted Leva he quickly turned to greet him. "Commander, have you decided to join the rescue team?"

"I figured you could need somebody on your team who is familiar with the rest of the senior crew."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said and gestured at the man beside him who stood straight as a beam. "Have you met Major Cesar Wasco yet?"

"Not personally," Leva said and stuck out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Pleasure's mine," Wasco said in a clipped tone and took the other man's hand with a firm grip. "And good to have you on board. We're about ready to deploy."

Leva nodded, doing his best to keep his handshake equally firm.

"We were just trying to ascertain the landing craft to utilize for this operation," Wasco said and pointed at the *Nebuchadrezzar*, *Eagle*'s sole runabout, which had already been readied for behind them.

"I advise against the runabout," Leva said. "It is too big of a target. Whoever is down there would see us coming from kilometers away. Shuttles would allow for a stealthier approach."

"The *Nebuchadrezzar* will give my men better opportunities to prepare for enemy engagement and most of our deployment scenarios have been devised with the runabout as a landing craft in mind," Wasco said.

Both men looked at Culsten and when he did not speak, Leva cleared his throat. "It's your call."

To his credit, Culsten allowed his indecisiveness to show only for a mere moment or so. "Yes, of course. Take shuttles. Are two enough?" he said but looked at Leva instead of at Wasco.

Leva did glance at Wasco who gave a curt nod as his only response.

The major turned to one of his officers. "Have the men ready for deployment in two shuttlecraft. We're Oskar Mike in ten."

A brown-furred Caitian marine lieutenant acknowledged the order and began to divide the soldiers for transport.

Just then Leva spotted another man stepping out of the runabout. He froze as he recognized him.

"Mister D'Karr, you will pilot the second shuttle," Wasco said to the Klingon warrior who acknowledged the order without uttering a word.

"What is *he* doing here?" Leva said.

Culsten seemed at a loss for words and Wasco decided to answer for him. "Mister D'Karr has volunteered for this mission. I have fought at the

side of Klingons before and trust me when I say that we most definitely want to have him with us."

"He is also an exceptional pilot," Culsten said, although he sounded slightly less confident than the marine.

"This is a mistake," Leva said.

Culsten wondered if Leva was right. After all, they had fought each other not a few hours earlier and possibly would have killed each other if security had not intervened. Putting them together now to try and save the captain could spell disaster for the rescue attempt. This hadn't been an issue before Leva had decided to join but now it suddenly looked like a really bad idea.

"I disagree," Wasco said, clearly impressed by D'Karr's abilities. "Next to my men, we couldn't ask for a better combat-trained fighter."

Leva eyed the Klingon who had chosen to ignore his presence and instead headed straight for a shuttle that was being raised from the hangar deck below. Leva turned to head toward the *Agincourt*, the other shuttle that was being prepared, instead. "Just keep him out of my way."

Wasco threw Culsten an asking expression.

Culsten tried on a smile but it was not reciprocated by the stoic marine and he quickly replaced it with a more serious gesture. "Good luck, Major," he said before he made a quick beeline for the exit, fearing that the rescue mission he was responsible for was in trouble before it had even left the ship.

\* \* \*

Epsilon Twelve's auxiliary control room was located two levels below the command deck and the distance was quickly covered by the away team mostly due to Jana Tren's insistence on keeping up a brisk pace. Of course, by now nobody needed extra motivation to get to a place of relative safety. Their run-in with the Jem'Hadar soldiers had confirmed everyone's worst fears that the base was under a full-out Dominion attack.

The team climbed down the empty turbo-shaft in silence everyone preoccupied with very similar concerns. Owens could tell that something else worried Tren and it wasn't just the fact that all their lives were now in grave danger.

They carefully exited the maintenance shaft but found no sign of a Jem'Hadar presence. Instead, they discovered more unconscious crewmembers. D level—which housed auxiliary control—was mostly used for storage and much of *Eagle*'s cargo had been deposited here. A great number of crates still littered the corridors and slowed their progress to the control room.

Jana Tren stopped the team in front of a heavy, reinforced door that looked more like an entrance to a shuttle bay than to a control room. She activated a hidden panel and entered a secret code. A final hand scan confirmed her identity and released the door panels.

She let out a heavy sigh when the two doors opened but froze in shock when she was greeted by a rifle pointed straight at her face.

Owens instinctively reached out for her to drag her out of the way but even before he could get to her, the rifle was lowered. He recognized the wielder immediately. "Commander Monroe?"

"It's you," the blonde-haired officer said with obvious relief. "Get in," she added and then quickly locked the doors behind the away team once they were inside. "I thought you had been gassed like the others."

"We managed to escape into the Jeffries tubes," Hopkins said and found an empty seat, welcoming the chance to rest.

Owens quickly surveyed the room. It was jam-packed with crates and containers most likely brought here directly from *Eagle*'s cargo bays. A few consoles were operating on minimal power. The lighting in the room was lower than standard but his eyes were thankful for the white light instead of the tiring crimson hue in the corridors. There was only one other exit, an equally large door at the opposite side of the rather spacious control room.

"Do you have communications?" he asked.

Monroe shook her head. "No. Whoever turned off the juice also terminated the main com-grid. We have a few operational computer stations though."

Owens gestured to Xylion and he immediately proceeded to the main console bank to investigate.

"How did you get access to this room?" Tren said, her tone sounding distinctly accusatory.

"I'm the executive officer of this station," she said, sounding bitter about it.

But the Betazoid wasn't satisfied with this explanation and shook her head. "The auxiliary control room is off-limits to all station personnel, including Captain Zalak. I'm the only one who even knows about its exact location."

"With all due respect," Monroe said and slightly shifted the weight of the phaser rifle she still carried. "We've been here for over four weeks. You only just arrived. You did not expect us to familiarize ourselves with our own station?"

Jana Tren gave the weapon a careful look but Commander Shelby Monroe didn't seem perturbed and maintained her calm demeanor.

Owens stepped up between the two women. "Let's try and focus on what's important," he said. "We need to find out what is happening and I need some answers."

Tren looked at him but didn't speak.

"First, I need to know why the Jem'Hadar are attacking an outpost with seemingly no strategic value whatsoever. What do they want here?" he said firmly. He had enough of the secrecy around this mission and he was not going to settle for anything but full disclosure this time around.

Tren could sense this. "Perhaps you're right," she said after a moment's worth of silent deliberation.

"I disagree," Monroe said and stepped around Owens. "He does not have sufficient clearance. This is strictly need-to-know."

"I don't care about clearance," Owens countered. "We're under attack and I demand to know why. In fact, I believe I have every right to know. My people's lives are on the line here."

"Captain Zalak would not allow this," the commander said. She held her ground but her voice had lost some of its earlier conviction.

"In case you hadn't noticed," said Edison, "Captain Zalak is not here which makes Captain Owens the senior officer."

But Monroe simply shook her head. "In Captain Zalak's absence, I'm the commanding officer of Epsilon Twelve."

Deen took a step toward the defiant first officer. "You can't be serious. This is hardly the time to squabble over who is in charge. Not while we're about to be overrun by Jem'Hadar."

"This entire debate is pointless in any regard," Tren said. "Even if you are in command of Epsilon Twelve, the Federation Council has given me full authority over this project. Therefore, if I chose to show Captain Owens, it is within my right to do so. And I will do just that," she said and considered the subject closed. She headed for the second pair of doors and gestured for Owens to follow her.

Monroe looked as if she wanted to protest again but considering her minority opinion, she held her peace.

"I never got to thank you for taking my weapon away earlier," Nora told her quietly once Owens and Tren were out of earshot. "That really worked out well for us," she added with a spiteful smile.

Monroe simply gave her a cold stare before stepping away and taking up position near the main entrance.

"All right, listen," Tren said to Owens once she had stepped in front of the heavy door. "I'll show you, and only you, what this base is really all about. I don't think I have to point out that everything you'll see is strictly classified. You cannot discuss it with anyone."

Owens nodded and turned to his first officer who stood nearby. "Commander, stay here and see what you can find out. We should be back shortly."

Tren in the meantime entered yet another code into yet another hidden panel which prompted the large blast door to rise. Owens held his breath, expecting for something truly astonishing to be revealed. Instead, he only found a short corridor leading to a much more common-looking door. Not a moment after they had stepped into the corridor he whipped around upon hearing the loud thud of the partition falling back into place.

"Please tell me that was supposed to happen."

She smiled and led him through the next door which turned out to be the entrance to a turbolift. "Epsilon Twelve consists of seven levels," she said.

Owens nodded. "I know."

"Yes, but what you don't know is that those levels only make up the upper part of the base," she said and turned to a blank screen inside the lift. "Computer, authenticate Jana Tren, zero-five-seven-seven-eight-uniform-charlie," she said and placed the palm of her hand against the flat screen.

The screen came to life. "Authenticating," the female computer voice replied. "Verifying. Handprint: Verified. Voiceprint: Verified. DNA signature: Verified. Verification complete. Welcome Agent Jana Tren."

The lift began to move downwards.

"What is this?" said Owens. "Starfleet Intelligence Headquarters?"

Owens noted that whatever power source was feeding this lift had not been affected by the Jem'Hadar attack. He wondered with some displeasure why it hadn't been possible to activate the other turbo lifts in this manner.

The elevator didn't move very fast. There was also not a lot of space in the car. The silence between them quickly became awkward and yet neither could think of anything to say. Owens even willed himself not to think, knowing that Tren might pick up on it.

When the lift finally came to a sudden halt and the door panels swished open, he felt strangely relieved. Tren moved out quickly and he followed closely.

They stepped into a massive and surprisingly brightly lit chamber. It was easily large enough to hold a small starship and its white floors, walls,

and tall ceiling gave the chamber a sterile and clinical feel. The hall was populated with several lab-coat-wearing personnel. Most of them were not Starfleet, Owens realized, but they weren't exactly civilians either. At least not any more civilian than Jana Tren.

A few meters in front of them the chamber was divided by a transparent partition and behind it, at the very center, stood the device for which the entire room seemed to have been created for.

To Owens, it looked somewhat like a horizontally aligned warp core. It had a large oval center and two wide conduits branching out from it. The entire device was pitch black except for a semi-transparent screen running along the sides of the conduits. They were pulsating in a bright red light, feeding energy, or something, into the central chamber. The device hung in mid-air, suspended at least five meters from the ground and ceiling by large support beams. Catwalks allowed easy access to the device and a few scientists were working on consoles and access points all around it.

Owens stepped up to the partition as he studied the unknown machine in detail.

A few of the scientists had turned toward the newcomers with surprise. One in particular, a gray-haired Grazerite seemed to show great irritation by his presence and quickly approached them.

"You can't bring him down here. What were you thinking?" he called out before he had even reached them.

"Doctor, please," Tren tried to calm him but he simply ignored her and stepped up to Owens. "Who are you? You can't be down here. This is a highly classified area. Don't you realize that by coming down here you are in direct violation of Federation Security protocol?"

"I'm Captain Michael Owens from the starship *Eagle* and in case you weren't aware, we're dealing with a major situation up above which I'm

certain justifies certain adjustments to whatever protocol you seem so concerned about."

This seemed to only help irritate him further. He turned to Tren. "What is this man talking about?"

"It appears we are under attack by Jem'Hadar forces," Tren said, trying to avoid eye contact with the scientist.

"Attack?" he said slowly as if he didn't want to believe. "But ... but your men? They're equipped to handle this situation, aren't they?"

She sadly shook her head. "My men are not here."

The Grazerite was clearly taken aback by that revelation.

"Now could somebody please enlighten me as to why the Jem'Hadar are interested in attacking this base?" Owens said and looked back at the imposing device. "What is this thing?"

"That," the scientist began and slowly stepped next to the captain, "is a weapon that will—"

"Win the war for us," Tren said, finishing his sentence for him.

The two exchanged a quick look and Owens wasn't entirely sure what it meant. "How?"

"The details are not important," she said.

He shot her a sidelong glance, letting her know that he didn't appreciate the secrecy anymore.

"Michael, please, I'm already violating half a dozen protocols by bringing you down here. It's sufficient to say that Project Archangel is currently representing our best hope to end this war quickly and efficiently and that is what we all want, is it not?"

He looked back at what she had called Archangel. The name didn't exactly instill him with a sense of equanimity but then again, he was looking at what had to be a weapon of immense destructive capabilities and poise was probably not what it had been designed to inspire. Owens had never liked weapons, big or small. He was a firm believer that most situations that required a weapon could be solved without one. However, he also understood that their best chance to end the war with the Dominion was by using force.

"This is Doctor Santesh-Yardo," Tren introduced the scientist, trying to distract Owens from further speculating about the nature of Archangel. "He's one of the most brilliant researchers in his field."

Owens gave him a curt nod.

Santesh seemed less interested in pleasantries, however. "I don't understand. If we're under attack, why are you down here? What are you going to do about this? We cannot let the Jem'Hadar get their hands on Archangel."

"We need to get in touch with *Eagle*," Owens said. "If this weapon is as important as you claim, we have to do whatever it takes to defend it from the Jem'Hadar."

His sentiment was quickly reciprocated by Tren and Santesh-Yardo.

"This level seems to be unaffected by the power loss," Owens said. "Do you have access to a communications station down here?"

"Archangel operates on a semi-independent power supply but we are hundreds of meters underground and surrounded by trithium ore. It would be impossible to get a signal out into orbit from here," the scientist said.

"There is an emergency transmitter beacon on E level," said Tren. "It's powerful enough to cut through any interference. With it, we should be able to reach your ship." *If it is still in orbit.*

Owens caught her thought and it hardly came as a surprise. It wasn't as if he hadn't entertained that possibility himself. But for now, he couldn't allow himself to believe that *Eagle* might have already become a victim of the Jem'Hadar attack. At least not yet.

"Doctor, while we will try to get reinforcements I will implement Code Magenta for Project Archangel," she said to Santesh-Yardo and then looked at Owens. "There are two access points to this level. One in the command center, which by now we have to assume has been taken by the Jem'Hadar and the one we took. With Magenta in place, all external access will be shut down. Only Doctor Santesh will be able to open the blast doors from down here."

Owens nodded slowly. "How strong are those doors?"

"It would take more than a tri-cobalt device to blast through them," she said.

Santesh-Yardo practically dragged them back toward the turbolift. "Fine, fine, you can discuss the details once you are out of here. I'd feel much safer with you back upstairs."

With that Owens and Tren slipped back into the lift which quickly moved upward again.

"He'll feel safer?" Owens said to Tren.

"The doctor is very protective of this project," she said. "And he should be. I did not exaggerate earlier. This weapon *will* win the war for us."

Owens did not doubt that she believed her words. "How long until it can be deployed?" he said. Her confidence in Archangel was inspiring him with a sensation he hadn't felt in a long time. Hope.

"We're about two weeks away from the first test runs. After that, maybe two more weeks. A month at the most."

The lift returned them to D level and once the blast door had shut behind them again, Tren entered another series of commands into the console. Once she was done it went completely dark.

She looked at him. "The underground lab is now fully locked out. Nobody should be able to get there from here."

He didn't know if to feel relieved or worried by that development. Santesh-Yardro, his scientists, and Archangel would be safe. But they were not. While the researchers below would be able to complete the work on the weapon that was designed to finally deliver them from war, Michael Owens and everybody else around him might not live long enough to see that day.

## IX – COUNTER-MOVE

Things were moving at the wrong pace. Teleka'clan was convinced of that.

This was not his first major combat engagement. He had taken part in many similar attacks since he had been awoken in a Dominion cloning center five years earlier. Granted, many of the Dominion's enemies in the Delta quadrant had been less advanced than the Federation or had lacked the willingness to fight like the humans and their allies did. But that was even more reason why he was convinced that this strike had to be carried out swiftly and before the Starfleet crew had a chance to mount an effective defense.

And yet that which was so perfectly obvious to him seemed to escape Wegnour. Instead of using all the forces under his command to push for an easy victory, the Vorta had decided to tip-toe around the enemy. This kind of overly cautious approach was making Teleka'clan sick.

"We have taken control of the base's command center. As anticipated there has been no resistance," a Jem'Hadar soldier reported from the communications station.

It was too easy, Teleka'clan felt. And he didn't like that he had not been allowed to join his men in battle. Instead, he was being kept on a short leash by the insufferable Vorta.

Wegnour didn't reply to the report. He was busy studying another console. He seemed nervous as if he was waiting for something to happen.

Teleka'clan stepped next to him, causing the Vorta to quickly clear the screen he had been looking at.

The Jem'Hadar first did not show the annoyance he felt by Wegnour's attempt to keep secrets. He couldn't understand the need. He

was a loyal subject of the Dominion. More loyal to the Founders than any Vorta could ever be.

"We have the command center," Teleka'clan repeated.

"Very good."

"What are our next orders?"

Wegnour seemed to consider the question for a moment. No matter how much he was trying to mask it, the Jem'Hadar realized that the Vorta wasn't sure of himself.

"We should initiate phase two of the attack," the Jem'Hadar commander continued when the Vorta did not reply.

Teleka'clan turned away in a clear sign of disrespect and headed straight for the exit. He was going to take action even if the Vorta could not.

Just before he had reached the doors Wegnour spun around. "Where do you think you're going?"

The Jem'Hadar first froze in place. "One of our patrols has failed to report in. I will investigate."

"You will look at me when addressing me, First."

Teleka'clan slowly turned. The Vorta did not look uncertain anymore. His face had transformed into a stern mask of determination. "If you cannot act on my orders," he said with disdain, "I will find someone who can and your services will become redundant."

The Jem'Hadar understood exactly what the Vorta was implying. There was only one fate that would await a redundant fighting machine.

"You will not leave this room until I order you to. You will take no action until I tell you to. You will not think until I have explicitly allowed you to."

The Jem'Hadar stood like petrified.

A small smile crept over Wegnour's face. "Make no mistake, Teleka'clan. I am in full control of this mission. And we will be successful if you do exactly what I tell you."

The Vorta's authority was absolute, Teleka'clan knew that. But there was one order he could not enforce no matter how much the Vorta demanded it. He could not order him to stop thinking. And at this precise moment, only one thought crossed the Jem'Hadar's mind.

Wegnour was lying.

\* \* \*

"We need weapons." It was the first thing Nora had said once Owens had outlined their situation and his plan. He had explained to his officers that it was absolutely vital that they held off the Jem'Hadar long enough until *Eagle* could be contacted and bring in reinforcements.

The plan was simple, really. Owens, Tren, and Nora would attempt to get to E level—one deck below—and use the emergency transmitter to get in touch with *Eagle*. Edison would join them but continue with Hopkins and Deen to the engineering section on F level. If Hopkins could reinitiate main power, they could use the station's automated defenses to fight off the attackers. Also, their chances of reestablishing communications and transporters would greatly increase once power was restored.

Xylion had determined that their problem with communications was due to external interference no doubt created by the Jem'Hadar attack force. Without main power, a more in-depth analysis would not be possible nor was there much of a chance to devise a way to counter the interference. But Owens had decided that the Vulcan and Lieutenant Commander Monroe would stay in the auxiliary control room where they would have the best chance to coordinate their defenses.

Tren stepped up to a row of crates. "We might not have much but we do have weapons," she said and began to open one crate after the other, each one packed with phaser rifles.

"These were for your men, weren't they?" Owens said.

The Betazoid nodded slowly, a sad expression crossing her face. Owens had noticed before that Jana's expression darkened significantly whenever she was reminded of the fate of her security force. It appeared to him as if their loss did not just affect her on a professional level but also on a deeply personal one as well. Whatever she felt, she shook it off quickly, grabbed the weapons, and began to distribute them among the officers.

"I'm going to search our surroundings for any survivors," said Monroe who had not taken Owens' new orders very well. She had kept her objections mostly to herself this time but her displeasure was not difficult to miss.

Edison shook his head. "The entire crew has been knocked out by anesthizine gas. They wouldn't do us much good."

But Monroe reached for a small box and opened it, revealing two rows of hypo injectors. "We have enough cordrazine here to resuscitate at least four dozen men. It won't be pretty but they'll be awake."

Owens gave her an approving nod. "Very well but don't stray too far from this room. The Jem'Hadar don't know our location yet and the longer we remain undiscovered the greater our chances for survival."

"Yes, sir," she said in a tone of voice that bordered on defiance.

Edison stepped up to Nora who was checking the settings of her newly acquired phaser rifle. Without a word, he reached into the crate to retrieve one for himself. He quickly looked around but nobody seemed to be in earshot. "Are you all right?"

She stopped checking her weapon. "I'm fine. Why do you ask?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

A smile came over her face. "You're worried about me."

Edison began to inspect his own rifle, pretending his entire focus was directed at making sure it was working properly. "I just want to make sure my security chief has a handle on things. Part of the job."

She nodded but couldn't quite get that smile off her face. "Sure."

He lowered his weapon and looked her straight in the eye. "Listen, be careful out there, all right?"

Her smile disappeared. "I've been in worse jams than this."

"Of that, I have no doubt."

"Let's get ready to move out," Owens called out from the other side of the room.

Edison gripped his weapon firmly and turned to the captain. But before he could walk away Nora reached out for his arm. "I'll be careful if you promise me something in return."

He shot her an asking expression.

"Let's both get out of this in one piece. There are a lot of things I still want to do to you," she said with a devilish grin.

"If there's a better reason to keep that promise, I wouldn't know it," he said and stepped away.

Nora took a breath, deactivated the safety of her rifle, and faced the captain. "Ready when you are, sir."

\* \* \*

Two of *Eagle*'s medium-sized shuttlecraft, the *Agincourt* and the *Roentgen*, cleared their mother ship's shuttle bay and raced toward the crimson planet below. Each vessel carried six Marines. Their mission: locate *Eagle*'s away team and return them safely to the ship.

Inside *Agincourt*, Leva sat at the helm with Major Wasco occupying the co-pilot's seat. The *Agincourt* had been designated lead ship and was going to approach the outpost below first while *Roentgen* would follow at a distance.

The entrance into the upper atmosphere proved to be uneventful. Once both ships had cleared the thick red stratosphere they found clear skies and a surface of reddish dirt and green and brown vegetation. The landscape that stretched out below was mostly undulated terrain with small hills and patches of thick tree growth.

"*Agincourt* to *Roentgen*," Leva said, "Initiating low-level approach, our designated landing zone is five point three kilometers west of Epsilon Twelve. Keep your distance and maintain radio silence."

"*Roentgen*, copy," replied the voice of Corporal Chrystal Neveu. Leva knew that D'Karr was piloting the *Roentgen* but he assumed that he had given the marine the task of handling communications. He certainly didn't mind.

Leva took the shuttle into a sharp dive to execute a combat approach. Sensors confirmed that *Roentgen* was mirroring the move.

"I'm reading massive interference on all sensors," Wasco said. "This radiation is already beginning to play havoc on our systems."

Leva checked his instruments. True enough the sensor read-outs had become nearly indecipherable and communications were already down. "This can't be natural."

"Whoever is out there," Wasco said, "they don't want us to know they're there."

Just as Leva began to level out the shuttle about eighty meters from the surface, he spotted a sudden flare of light in the distance. At first, he thought it was an indicator light from Epsilon Twelve when he realized that it was not stationary. It was coming their way. And fast.

Wasco saw it too. "Incoming, ten o'clock."

"Hold on," Leva called over his shoulder to alert the marines sitting in the back before he broke off the approach sharply and dove the shuttle even closer to the ground.

The missile missed them by less than five meters and the alert klaxons began to howl after the computer had finally acknowledged the danger. Without working sensors, it had been unable to detect the incoming fire until it was practically too late. Leva quickly understood that they were going to have to do this the old-fashioned way and rely on their eyes.

"Another one, eight o'clock, high," Wasco said as he cranked his head back to maintain a visual with the inbound missile.

"We need to land now. Can you see *Roentgen*?"

The major shook his head. His field of vision was limited, of course, the shuttle didn't have windows in the back but the other vessel was not where it was supposed to be. He didn't voice his worst fear. "Negative, no visual."

*Agincourt* shook as it brushed against the treetops below, traveling at four hundred fifty kilometers per hour. Leva momentarily lost control of the small craft and it banked sharply to the right. As it turned out the undesired course change saved their lives. The missile shot straight into the ground just ten meters to their left, igniting a small firestorm where it had hit.

"There is a cave at two o'clock," Leva said as he spotted the opening. "It might be big enough for us to fit in."

Wasco turned. "Looks awful small," he said once he spotted the narrow tunnel. It looked like an old mining shaft, supported by solid duranium beams. "We hit one of those support struts and this thing ends before it ever gets started."

"No choice," Leva said and pointed the nose of the shuttle straight at the entrance. As *Agincourt* raced toward the shaft, Leva could swear it was becoming smaller the closer they got. About two hundred meters out he started to transfer power to the reverse thrusters. It was a calculated risk. Even if he didn't hit the support beams and could squeeze the shuttle into the opening, if the shaft turned out to be too short they wouldn't have nearly enough braking power to avoid a fiery crash.

Wasco decided not to distract Leva with the other missile he had just spotted homing in on them. Instead, he considered his team in the back. "Brace for landing. This might be a rough one."

Leva kept his eyes focused straight ahead. Only at the last moment did he realize that the opening was just about big enough to allow the shuttle through. But they were still traveling at over two hundred kilometers per hour, even grazing the beams would make the landing a fatal endeavor.

He held his breath and *Agincourt* slipped into darkness.

Seconds later Wasco found the control for the vessel's flood lights. The shaft lightened up and to their collective relief they found that it widened as they went on.

The shuttle decelerated sharply.

"It's caved in ahead," Waco noticed.

Leva narrowed his eyes as he forced every last drop of power into the breaking thrusters, red-lining them in the process. It was not going to be enough. *Agincourt* would slam into a pile of boulders that had come loose from the ceiling.

"You predicted a rough landing," Leva said. "Looks like, you're going to get one." Realizing that they had far too much momentum to stop in time, Leva did the only thing that he could think of. He drove the shuttle into the ground.

The impact threw him out of the seat and his head connected harshly against a console. The last thing he saw was Wasco's usually stoic face transformed into a mask of terror. It was darkness after that.

\* \* \*

The crimson-shimmering corridor on E level seemed entirely devoid of movement or life.

This was until a low rumbling sound echoed out of a ventilation shaft on the ceiling. Moments later the grating covering the shaft dropped to the ground below and Nora Laas not a moment later. She landed in a crouch and swiftly waved her phaser rifle in both directions. The flashlight mounted on the weapon revealed nothing but emptiness in either direction. She waited a few more seconds before looking up again.

"Clear," she said just loud enough for the ones waiting above her to hear.

Owens came through next; landing slightly less gracefully than Nora had moments before. He handed her his weapon before he caught another rifle being tossed from above. He had wanted to help Tren out of the ventilation tunnel above but she had apparently decided that she didn't need him except for holding her rifle.

She landed next to him, maintaining a near-perfect balance.

"That wasn't too bad," she said with a small smile as she was handed back her weapon.

"You were always the athletic type," Owens said mirroring her smile. "Didn't you come in sixth in the Academy marathon?"

"Fourth," she said with mock annoyance.

In truth, Owens remembered perfectly well that she had come in fourth at the end of that race nineteen years ago. It had only been due to a computer error she had been placed seventh in the final rankings. It had

never been corrected and Michael had always taken pleasure in teasing her about it.

"Perhaps you could use that award-winning athleticism to lead us to that transmitter?" he said.

"This way," she said and headed out.

Nora knew that the two of them had a past. There was probably nobody left on the ship who hadn't made that connection. But she couldn't help but roll her eyes at their interchange. She hoped that she wasn't that obvious with Gene.

As they continued toward their destination, they found their surroundings much emptier than on the upper level. Tren had explained that E level had hardly any storage rooms and therefore far fewer obstacles littered their path.

Owens soon realized that while the level might have been clear of obstructions it certainly didn't lack intersections. It was not much different than navigating a maze and he didn't notice any posted directions or signs to speak of.

Tren led the way quietly and with confidence.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" he said after the many turns were beginning to give him a headache.

"I studied the blueprints to this station in every detail," she said without slowing her pace.

"Wait," said Nora. "You're saying that you've never actually been here before?"

"I practically designed this place."

Owens uttered a sigh of relief. "Good," he said as they rounded another corner. "I would hate to think that we might get lost in this—"

Tren had stopped dead in her tracks. Owens realized just a moment later why. There was a solid wall right in front of them. They had walked straight into a dead end.

"That can't be right," she mumbled absentmindedly.

Nora instantly whipped around. Dead ends usually meant ambushes to her. The corridor behind them was clear.

"We must have taken a wrong turn," Jana said.

"You think?" Nora shot back.

But the Betazoid was too preoccupied with retracing their steps in her mind to catch the sarcasm in the security officer's voice. She turned around and began to head back. "I'm pretty sure it was that last intersection."

"As sure as you were that this was the right way?"

"Give her a break, Lieutenant, it is dark here and there are a lot of corridors," Owens said, defending Tren. It felt natural for him to do so.

They returned to the last intersection and Tren tried to get her bearings while Nora carefully checked all directions for signs of their enemy. She felt far too exposed in the open like that.

When her flashlight caught something, she quickly dropped to a crouch. "Sir," she whispered.

Owens turned, bringing his phaser rifle to bear as well.

It was some form of object that had startled them, no thirty meters down the corridor. It seemed motionless.

The captain gestured for Nora to approach by staying close to the far wall while he closed in from the opposite side. Tren covered them from the intersection.

As Owens carefully stepped closer, the object was beginning to take shape. He soon realized that it was just the tip of something larger. It was black and polished. A boot.

"It's a body," Nora said. "Starfleet."

They quickened their approach. While Owens stepped right up to the body Nora secured their surroundings, always looking for that trap.

Owens' flashlight traveled up the length of the man's body. He wore a red command shirt and the rank insignia of a captain. His skin had a distinctly blue tone. "Zalak," Owens said and knelt next to the unconscious man. He reached out to feel for his pulse but couldn't find one. He wasn't entirely sure where to check for one on a Bolian.

Tren had moved up now and stood over the two captains. "Is he all right?"

Michael looked up at her. "I'm not sure."

Zalak began to cough, causing Owens to jump slightly. "Captain?"

But Zalak didn't seem able to stop so Owens helped him up into a sitting position against the wall.

"What ..." he started but another fit of coughing stopped him short.  
"What happened?"

"The base was flooded with anesthizine gas," Owens said. "It must have knocked you out as well."

Zalak nodded. "Yes, I remember. We lost power and communications. I tried to get to the emergency transmitter before I lost consciousness."

Owens helped his fellow captain to his feet. "It got almost all of your crew, you're lucky you snapped out of it."

"Luck has nothing to do with it," Zalak said. "My people have a natural resistance to certain forms of gasses. Do you know what triggered it to be released?"

Tren answered his question. "We're being attacked by Jem'Hadar forces. They're after the device."

"That's impossible," he said. "This location is highly confidential."

"Well, somehow they found out. We can try to figure out how exactly later," Owens said. "We have to get to the auxiliary transmitter and contact *Eagle*. That's our best chance right now."

Zalak nodded in agreement. "It isn't far."

"Well then," Nora said to the Bolian after shooting Tren and insinuating look. "Perhaps you could lead us there."

Tren either didn't notice or didn't seem bothered by the implication. She kept her eyes firmly on Captain Zalak.

"Certainly, but first I need to know if it's safe," he said a glanced directly at Tren

She understood and nodded. "For now. I have implemented a lockdown of the facility. There is virtually no access to the facility."

"Then let's not waste any more time," he said and gestured for Nora's sidearm since he didn't have one of his own. She unholstered the phaser only reluctantly and then handed it over. "Follow me."

\* \* \*

"I could fly the Magellan Spiral blindfolded."

"Anyone could," said Lif Culsten to Srena's bold boast. "The question is could you keep your vessel in one piece doing it."

The Andorian ensign shrugged to maintain her cool demeanor but her tweaking antennae gave her away. "They didn't call me Spiraling Srena for nothing when I flew for Nova Squad."

"You were in Nova?"

Srena's eyes sparkled. "You sound surprised."

Culsten leaned back in the command chair. "I didn't realize."

"So what?" chimed in Lance Stanmore sitting at operations. "Is that supposed to be a mark of great distinction? It's just a bunch of over-zealous cadets who think they're better than anybody else."

"You're just mad that you didn't get in," said Srena.

"Damn right."

"I was flight leader of those overzealous cadets in my senior year," said Culsten, feigning a sense of hurt.

Stanmore smirked. "I rest my case."

Srena laughed and then turned back to look at Culsten. "What was your call sign?"

"Silver," he said, using his hand to brush his long hair

"You're Silver?"

Culsten nodded, momentarily feeling the pride of being recognized by a fellow pilot.

"Thanks to some of your off-regulations maneuvers my class was made to sit through sixteen hours of safety lectures," she said with a scowl. "Those were not fun."

Culsten frowned but quickly turned it back into a smile. "Maybe not but I bet you needed them."

He had been so engaged in the banter that he hadn't even noticed Doctor Wenera step onto the bridge. Only now did he realize that she was standing nearby, giving him a look a mother would give a misbehaving child. Out of instinct, he straightened in his seat.

"Could I have a word with you?" Wenera said.

"Certainly," he said with a waning smile and stood. "Let's take the ready room."

The doctor nodded and let Culsten lead the way.

Even though he was *Eagle*'s acting captain, he felt immediately uncomfortable inside Owens' office. Like he didn't belong there. And he knew he didn't. He was merely a guest in the ready room and as such he decided not to sit down in the chair behind the glass and ebony desk.

"What are you doing?" she said just seconds after the doors had closed shut behind her.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Don't you think that the way you talk and joke with the crew is somewhat inappropriate given our present situation?"

He could not see any fault in what he had done. "I've heard the captain tell a few jokes on the bridge before."

“In a crisis? During wartimes?”

He didn’t have an answer.

“I don’t think what you’re doing is a good thing if things get tough. You’re treating them like equals.”

“We are. Lance and I have the same rank and are about the same age and Srena is only about –”

She shook her head and cut him off. “You’re in command, Lif. While you sit in that chair you’re not an equal and you know that. They will depend on you to lead them and I don’t think you’ll be very good at it if they think of you as their best friend.”

Culsten leaned against the desk as he considered her words. He had not expected a speech about appropriate command behavior coming from Doctor Ashley Wenera. And he couldn’t really see her point either. What was the harm in maintaining cordial relationships with the people under his command? He could be both a captain and a friend to the crew.

“No offense, doc, but isn’t your own experience as a commanding officer rather limited?”

Wenera didn’t look as if she had taken offense. “You don’t think I make life-and-death decisions in sickbay? Before coming on *Eagle*, I served with Starfleet Medical’s interstellar relief agency, and trust me when I tell you that I was put into more than one situation where I had to give orders that could decide the fate of many patients,” she said calmly. “Don’t get me wrong, I do believe in making friends and most of my colleagues are but not when lives hang in the balance.”

“I see your point.”

“There is another reason I asked to speak to you.”

"Another lecture?"

"I wish," she said. "I ran another analysis on the effects of the increased tritium radiation on our people on the surface."

He braced himself for bad news.

"I'm afraid I might have been wrong with my initial assessment. Prolonged exposure to the radiation might quite possibly lead to long-term cellular damage. Especially among the human members of the away team."

He put a hand in front of his eyes and rubbed his temples. "What can we do?"

This time she didn't have an answer for him. She berated herself for having been so optimistic at first, something that had given both herself and Culsten a false sense of security, creating the illusion that time was on their side. Now she most certainly knew that this was not the case. Whatever trouble Owens and the others were in had just doubled. Perhaps that was the reason that she had suddenly felt that Culsten's frivolous behavior with the crew was entirely out of place.

"Srena to Silver."

Culsten looked up at the ceiling, suddenly very embarrassed at the mention of his former call sign. "What is it?"

"We might have detected something here. You'd better have a look at it."

Culsten glanced at Wenera and didn't miss the scowl on her face. "We're on our way," he said and then added. "And Srena?"

"Yes."

"I think it would be more appropriate if you'd address me as Lieutenant Culsten," he said more quietly.

*"Yes, sir, Lieutenant,"* she added playfully and terminated the connection.

He offered Wenera a sheepish look but she simply rolled her eyes and then followed him back onto the bridge.

"What do we have?" he said as soon as he had left the ready room.

"A possible sensor contact," said Lieutenant Trinik at tactical. "Six-hundred thousand kilometers at four-five mark one-seven-eight."

"So close?" He wasn't entirely able to keep the concern out of his voice.

"Whatever it is," Stanmore said, "it's close to the magnetic pole of Ligos IV which explains why we are not getting a clear signal."

Culsten took the center chair. "Yellow Alert."

Wenera who had taken the seat next to him gave him a quizzical expression.

"The last time we had a fuzzy sensor contact we ended up facing two Jem'Hadar attack fighters," Culsten said as he felt his throat tightening.

"I think history is about to repeat itself," said Stanmore as he manipulated his controls.

The image on the main viewscreen shifted, now showing a heavily magnified image of Ligos IV. But the crimson-colored planet was not the reason for the sudden shiver running down Culsten's spine.

At the very center of the screen, two unmistakably bug-shaped starships were making a beeline approach toward them. It was going to be a question of minutes until he would have to—for the first time ever—lead the ship and its crew into battle.

“Oh my,” said Wenera, summing up the feelings of everyone present on *Eagle’s* bridge.

## X – SECOND FRONT

Commander Edison, DeMara Deen, and Louise Hopkins had split up from Owens' team on E level to continue to the level below which held most of Epsilon Twelve's engineering systems. But unlike their colleagues, they did not find empty corridors and easy passage. Instead, their path was blocked by numerous heavy crates and containers. It appeared as if the crew of the engineering deck had been caught by surprise while in the middle of squaring away much of the cargo that had just been delivered to the outpost. Several crewmembers were sprawled out in between the crates and for *Eagle*'s officers, the way to main engineering was quickly turning into an obstacle course. Thankfully they had yet to detect any sign of their enemy.

"I think I now understand your hesitation coming here," said Hopkins as she helped the first officer push a large barrel out of their way.

Deen was gently lowering an incapacitated female crew member onto the floor to make room for them to climb over a crate directly ahead. She turned to look at the chief engineer. "Trust me, this is not what I expected at all."

Hopkins nodded once they had cleared the barrel, still slightly out of breath.

"If nothing else," said the first officer. "Consider it good exercise," he added with a smile, trying to defuse the increasing tension with some humor.

They all understood the seriousness of the situation. The captain had made it quite clear that Epsilon Twelve was vital to the war effort and that its defense was an imperative. Why exactly, nobody but Owens and Tren knew. And while he didn't trust the Betazoid agent, he was willing to

follow the captain to the ends of the universe if necessary. Even if that meant carrying out orders he would never fully understand.

"Sure," Deen said with a sheepish smile. "Climbing hundreds of meters in near darkness, navigating an obstacle course littered with lifeless bodies while being surrounded by an invisible enemy should be part of every workout routine."

But Edison decided to ignore her impertinence and instead focused on the chief engineer. Even though Hopkins was at least seven years older than the youthful DeMara he was much more worried about her. Deen was not really the fighter type, brought up on a world of utter peace and harmony, violence had been an almost alien concept to her after leaving her home world. But Deen had adapted quickly to the rather harsh reality of the universe. Hopkins on the other hand had been shielded from much of the cruelty of war due to her position. Even before the war, she had hardly ever joined away missions and since the outbreak of hostilities with the Dominion she had retreated to her engine room even more. Certainly, she had seen death and destruction in that role but she had been spared the nastiness of the kind of combat that would have required her to look into her enemy's eyes.

If Hopkins was concerned about their predicament, however, she did a good job hiding it. She reached for the tricorder she had brought with her from the auxiliary control room. The sensors were still non-operational but she had managed to upload basic schematics of Epsilon Twelve before they had left.

"We're almost there," she said and pointed at an intersection ahead. "If we turn left up here it should lead us right into the heart of engineering."

Edison nodded and indicated for his fellow officers to climb over the last few crates blocking their path before he followed. They made the turn and discovered with great relief that the way ahead seemed mostly clear.

But after only a few steps down the empty corridor a sudden noise behind them made all three of them swing around at the same time, their phaser rifles at the ready. But the flashlights caught nothing but an empty corridor.

The sound returned. Edison thought it had a vaguely metallic quality but he couldn't place the sound.

"You guys are hearing this too, right?" whispered Hopkins without taking her eyes off the corridor ahead.

Deen nodded and took a careful step forward. A sudden metallic clank and then nothing.

Edison covered Deen as she stepped closer to the wall. Her flashlight found a small air vent in the bulkhead positioned at waist height. She knelt and inspected the narrow shaft with her rifle. Edison stepped next to the hatch covering the shaft and reached out to open it. Deen raised her weapon into position.

In one swift motion, he removed the hatch.

Deen peered inside. "Clear."

Hopkins stepped up to get a look herself.

"It's too small for a humanoid to fit through," Deen said.

"Maybe there's something on this station that isn't humanoid," Hopkins said quietly.

Edison noticed the fear in the young woman's eyes. "Or maybe it was nothing more than a leaking coolant conduit. Let's not waste time on hypotheses. We have a job to do."

Deen nodded and stood. "How much further to main engineering?"

Hopkins gave the empty shaft another suspicious look before returning to lead the way toward their destination.

They reached it just a few short minutes later. Epsilon Twelve's main engineering section was not much more than a cargo hold-sized room filled with computer consoles and status displays. Two heavy blast doors allowed access into the room. Both of them were currently fully open. Most of the consoles were dark or operating on emergency power. No more than five engineers had occupied the large room when the gas had been released. Now their unconscious bodies had either collapsed to the floor or on top of their stations.

"Dee, see if you can find a way to shut those doors," Edison said the moment he had gotten a picture of the situation. "Louise, I want you to look into how we can reestablish main power."

The two officers acknowledged and went straight to work while Edison cautiously investigated the second entrance. He found no obvious signs of an enemy presence.

The moment he had stepped back into the engine room the blast door came down and so did the one on the opposite side. He found Deen and gave her an appreciative nod. He also allowed himself a small sigh of relief, knowing that for the moment they were safe from a surprise attack.

Hopkins shook her head with frustration as she studied the main status control panel. "The generators have been shut down," she said and then turned away from the useless computer station. "There is nothing I can do from here. I need direct access to the generators."

"Where are they?" Edison said

Hopkins' search took only a few moments. She noticed a door in the back of the engine room and gestured toward it. "That way," she said and stepped right through. Deen and Edison followed closely.

The small room contained a central hatch leading downward. The light was significantly dimmer here but Hopkins seemed undeterred as she climbed into the hatch. Edison wanted to stop her and suggest that he went first but it was too late. Instead, he and Deen helped illuminate her way as she descended the ladder.

"Yes, this is the reactor room all right," she called up once she had reached the bottom. "I can see at least three standard fusion generators. There is something else down here but ..."

"What is it, Lou?" Deen said when Hopkins had stopped talking. She could still see her standing at the bottom of the ladder and staring at whatever she had found. But she was quiet, seemingly frozen in place.

"Lieutenant?" Edison said with more urgency.

She did not react.

Edison and Deen exchanged worried expressions and then quickly made their way down the ladder.

The reactor room's floor consisted of metal grating that squeaked noticeably when Edison set foot on it.

The sound snapped Hopkins out of her trance and she whipped around to face Edison. He could see her eyes wide open as if in shock. They were quickly becoming moist.

He stepped around her and found the room much darker than the rest of the engineering section. But the few operational consoles and the

warning indicator lights on the three heavy generators were enough to give an adequate picture of the massacre that had happened here.

Half a dozen engineering officers lay dead on the deck. The reason it was immediately apparent that they had not been gassed like the others was the smell that filled the entire room. The second equally powerful sign was the large amount of blood that covered the corpses and trickled down the metal grating. These crewmembers had been killed viciously at close distance and not by energy weapons either. The killers had used seemingly razor-sharp melee weapons to dispose of their victims. And the engineers had not stood a chance, even if they had tried to fight back, there was no indication whatsoever that they had managed to even wound one of their attackers.

Deen reached the sight a moment later. Her hand shot up to cover her mouth. "What ... happened here?"

But no answer was forthcoming. Not even Edison could find words to explain what they had discovered. He had seen massacres in his nineteen-year Starfleet career before but never one more determinedly executed than the one before him now. His state of initial shock lasted a few seconds. Then his rational mind kicked in. Whoever had done this could come back and by that time they better had main power back online. He tore himself away from the scene of death to address Hopkins who was still staring at the opposite bulkhead with a blank expression on her face.

"Lieutenant, I know this is going to be difficult but I need you to get those generators back online."

Hopkins didn't reply, hardly even moved a single muscle.

Edison stepped next to her and gently put a hand on her shoulder which caused her to look into his eyes. "Louise, listen to me. If we don't get main power restored quickly whatever happened to these people might

very well happen to all of us. I know this is hard but we cannot afford to stop now."

"These people. They were just engineers," she said. "They weren't soldiers."

The next words were difficult for Edison to say but he knew he had to. "We're all soldiers now, Louise."

She turned back around to look over the slain bodies. One thought prevailed in her mind more than any other. That could have been her people, lying in a pool of their own blood. It could have been her friends. It could have been her.

"The captain, everybody, depends on us getting power restored," Edison said quietly. "You're the best engineer I know. Do what you came here to do."

Hopkins took a small breath. "I need light and I need tools," she said softly and then without another word walked toward the generators without even looking down at the bodies between her feet, seemingly unaware of the blood she was stepping through.

Edison turned to Deen who had remained utterly quiet. "Are you okay?"

She didn't reply immediately. "I think I—" she stopped herself when her voice left her. She quickly wiped away a single tear that was threatening to escape her eye. "What do you need me to do?" she said.

"Go back up and find whatever tools and light sources you can find."

She nodded and quickly climbed up the ladder.

Edison watched Hopkins for a moment as she began to inspect the first generator. She seemed entirely focused on the task at hand now, her

eyes didn't stray toward her sickening surroundings. He knew that she couldn't allow for that to happen. He couldn't allow for that to happen. And so he removed his uniform jacket, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, and went to work doing the most unenviable job he had ever done.

\* \* \*

"Nest, Alfa Chick. Bird One: Touchdown. Bird Two: Presumed KIA. Proceeding to objective."

Major Cesar Wasco expectantly looked at Lance Corporal Lisa Sanders, a tall and athletically built, short-haired, dark-skinned human, and the team's communication expert once she had finished her report to *Eagle*.

"As expected we have no contact with the ship. I have also been unable to contact Epsilon Twelve or anyone on the *Roentgen*," Sanders said.

Wasco acknowledged with a curt nod. "Very well, maintain radio silence starting now," he said and looked around the tunnel into which their shuttle had landed. It was without doubt man-made, the support beams and angular shape attested to that. *Agincourt* had crashed head-first into a heap of rocks that seemed to block the way deeper into the shaft. The shuttle crew had survived the rough landing mostly intact. There had been a few broken bones and a lot of bruises but nothing that Corporal Montenegro—their resourceful medic—hadn't been able to fix. The other shuttle had most likely been obliterated by the anti-air missiles they had so narrowly avoided. Wasco didn't allow himself time to mourn for his men. Instead, his mind was preoccupied with how he was going to fulfill his mission with only half of his team at his disposal.

The Marine major joined Leva who was inspecting the front part of the *Agincourt* that was now wedged in between the rocks.

"A lot of structural damage here," he said. "But I don't think the hull has been compromised and the engines are in relatively good shape. We might be able to take her back into orbit."

Wasco nodded and looked at the boulders ahead. They were blocking the entire width of the tunnel but he was sure that there was enough room at the top to pass through.

"Sir."

He turned and spotted his second-in-command, J'ret—a tall, dark-furred Caitian—coming his way. He had been charged with securing the tunnel entrance. "The outside seems clear," he said in his distinctly feline voice.

"How do you want to proceed?" said Leva as he stood and dusted off his uniform.

"According to this map," said Wasco and regarded the reinforced combat padd he was carrying, "there is a large network of old mining shafts crisscrossing this entire area. One of them should get us closer to Epsilon Twelve undetected."

Leva glanced at the padd. "How old is that map?"

"About twenty years."

Leva shot the other man a skeptical look.

"I know it's not ideal, Commander but it's the best we've got."

"I want to have a look at the surface first," Leva said. "Get a better picture of where we are and where we need to go."

Wasco nodded and gestured for two of his men. "Staff Sergeant," he said addressing a Vulcan Marine. "I want you and Montenegro securing the shuttle and finding a way over these rocks. The rest with us."

Leva and the four Marines made their way to the entrance of the mining shaft within a couple of minutes. Outside the temperature was hot and humid and Leva immediately broke out in a light sweat, regretting his decision to leave the shaft at once. The rocky terrain around them was mostly arid and yet still managed to produce several trees and dense crimson-hued grasses. The gravity on Ligos IV was slightly higher than on Earth, causing the reddish-brown tree trunks to grow at awkward-looking forty-five-degree angles. To Leva, the sparse forest surrounding them appeared askew and it gave him a headache to look at it for too long.

The Marines immediately fanned out, creating a small perimeter around the entrance to the mine.

Wasco consulted his padd. "According to our latest sensor data gathered from orbit, Epsilon Twelve should be seven point three clicks southeast," he said and turned into the direction he believed the outpost to be. Unfortunately, their line of sight was blocked by the trees that even though unconventionally shaped had grown to considerable height.

"Lieutenant J'ret," Wasco said and pointed at the trees ahead.

The Caitian seemed to understand instantly. While the other Marines covered him, he ran toward the tree line and with cat-like agility leaped onto the tree trunk nearest to him. His long tail helped him maintain his balance as he effortlessly jumped from one wide trunk to another until his brown-furred body disappeared within the foliage.

Leva watched with amazement.

Wasco changed a few settings on the rubberized padd and the palm-sized screen shifted to show an image of a red and brown blur. It took Leva

a few moments to realize that he was looking at what the Caitian tree climber was seeing, most likely through a small sensor attached to his combat rifle. Then the picture cleared when J'ret had found an open spot from where to overlook his surroundings.

The sensor found the outpost where Wasco had said it would be. It was not much more than a small gray structure with an attached landing pad nestled within the hills. As the image zoomed in closer, Leva noticed that the landing platform held three cargo shuttles. From this distance, he couldn't spot any movement.

"Most of the outpost is underground," Wasco said as he studied the image.

J'ret zoomed out again and centered on an object about a kilometer east of the outpost. At first, neither Wasco nor Leva could make out what had captured the Caitian's interest until he zoomed closer. It was a starship. A big one.

"Jem'Hadar battle cruiser," Wasco said quietly unable to entirely hide his surprise at this revelation.

"We didn't know they could land those," Leva said, his eyes remaining glued to the image. The presence of the battlecruiser was casting large doubts over the possible success of this rescue mission. He wasn't certain how many troops the massive vessel could carry but he was certain it far outnumbered *Eagle*'s entire crew complement. Whatever the Jem'Hadar were after, they were dead serious about getting it.

Leva had been so deep in thoughts of potential failure that he had not noticed Lisa Sanders quietly stepping up next to the Major and whispering in his ear.

Wasco quickly indicated to his men using hand gestures only: *Possible contact, approaching from the northeast.*

Leva gripped his phaser rifle but before he could even find his bearings Sanders and Corporal Adenji were beginning to mount a defense, their combat rifles at the ready they slowly crept toward the approaching attackers at far angles in hopes of flanking them in between them.

Leva decided to take the center while Wasco stayed slightly behind, trying to find higher ground to operate from.

The tall reddish grass made it difficult to spot anything past a few meters but Leva could now almost feel an enemy presence. Fully aware that they were most likely facing Jem'Hadar with the ability to shroud and become near invisible, he was ready to open fire at a moment's notice. He double-checked his flanks. Both Marines were still within his field of vision, proceeding forward like wild cats on the prowl. Something brown and orange moved in the trees overhead. J'ret was covering them from above.

And then sudden movement to the left, close to Adenji's position. The African Marine had noticed it too and was raising his rifle, ready to deliver a preemptive strike. He never got the chance.

A metallic blade had appeared from seemingly nowhere and was now hovering a centimeter from his throat, paralyzing the Marine.

Leva could see the blade but not the wielder. Just as he wanted to backtrack to get a clear shot at the attacker, he froze himself as he felt a weapon pointed straight at his head. He knew he couldn't escape. He cursed himself for having been so careless as he readied himself for the point-blank impact.

"Friendlies," called J'ret call from above once he had finally made visual contact with their supposed attackers.

Leva turned his head carefully to see the smiling face of Corporal Chrystal Neveu holding the combat rifle to his head. She quickly withdrew it when she noticed the angry scowl on his face.

"If you were my enemy," a very familiar voice said, addressing Corporal Adenji "You'd already be dead."

Only then did Leva realize that the weapon that had threatened to cut off the corporal's head was, in fact, a Klingon *bat'lath* sword and the wielder was none other than D'Karr.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Leva said, unable to hide his rising anger. "Don't you think we have enough problems without playing your games?" Some of the anger he knew was covering for the embarrassing fear that had washed over him when he had noticed the muzzle of that phaser pointing straight at his cranium. But he didn't care. The Klingon had clearly overstepped his boundaries by a couple of leaps. "We thought you were dead."

"Even more reason to remind you that the enemy could be anyone and anywhere," D'Karr said in his defense but without a hint of regret in his voice.

"I'm sorry, sir," Neveu quickly interjected much more remorseful. "It sounded like a good idea when Mister D'Karr suggested it."

"Which part of scaring the living daylights out of us sounded like a good idea?" Sanders demanded who had been apprehended in a similar manner by Sergeant Shin-Ja Moon.

They had no answer to give.

"Marines fall in, double time," Wasco called out without even trying to mask his own annoyance.

Within a few seconds, five Marines joined the three from the *Agincourt* on the clearing in front of the mine. They quickly lined up in front of the major who kept his eyes firmly on Master Sergeant Wes Shinsky, a red-haired human Marine and the highest-ranking member of the *Roentgen* outfit. "Sitrep, now," he said sharply.

Shinsky replied without hesitation. "Sir! The shuttle was shot down. Managed emergency beam out. One man down. Private Ed'w'a didn't make it. Sir!"

Wasco seemed to consider that for a moment. When he spoke again his voice had found its usual calm again. "What just happened was a stupid thing to do and you should have known better. We will discuss reprimands later. Arrange your fire teams and get ready to move out. We're going through the mine. Assemble by the shuttle. Dismissed."

The Marines acknowledged without verbal response and quickly followed the majors' orders.

Leva couldn't quite believe that Wasco had let them off the hook that easily. Once the Marines were out of earshot he approached him. "Is that it? That's all you're going to say about the matter?"

Wasco looked at the Romulan for a moment before he spoke. "Commander, rest assured that I *will* deal with this in a much more befitting manner once this mission is completed," he said and took a small step toward the Starfleet officer, decreasing his distance from him. "To be honest, right now I'm just relieved that we still have three functional fire teams." He then threw a look at the Klingon warrior who was also getting ready to move into the mine. "As far as the instigator of all this is concerned, he is part of your team and you'll have to deal with him the way you see fit." With that Wasco turned and followed his men.

Leva remained in place, his eyes fixed on the Klingon who refused to make eye contact with him. "My team? I don't think so," he mumbled before he headed toward the mine himself.

\* \* \*

Ever since joining Starfleet Academy, Lif Culsten had wanted to someday have a starship command of his own. He had always greatly admired the famous ship captains of the past, their accomplishments, their discoveries, and the differences they had made in the greater scheme of things. He had always desired to join that elite club for the respect and the glory and perhaps even for the fame. Taking a starship into battle, and putting a crew of hundreds into harm's way had never been part of those aspirations.

It was clear that he wouldn't get to have a say in the matter as he watched with dread the two Jem'Hadar attack ships on the view-screen, moving away from *Eagle*. Only moments before they had passed the Federation starship, unleashing volleys of powerful polaron-charged energy blasts, causing *Eagle* to shudder heavily under his feet. His hopes that the Jem'Hadar were perhaps retreating, satisfied with simply rattling the Starfleet ship were squashed seconds later.

"They're coming around for another pass," said Stanmore, his voice sounding slightly more stressed than usual.

Culsten jumped onto his feet. He knew it was perhaps not the smartest idea to stand in the middle of battle but he could not sit still for one more instant. "Phasers and torpedoes," he said. "Target the lead ship and fire."

The Vulcan at tactical followed the order without hesitation. He was not as experienced as Leva but Trinik had been well trained by *Eagle*'s chief tactical officer.

A barrage of phaser fire was unleashed by the ship's beam emitters and was followed by half a dozen torpedoes. But the attackers had plenty of space to maneuver. Only two of the torpedoes found their targets.

"Lead ship has been hit," said Trinik. "Their shields are holding."

From glancing at the viewscreen, Culsten could tell that the enemy was back in striking distance. "Evasive actions."

Srena was equally quick to act but she had only very limited room to operate while she tried to maintain orbit.

The Jem'Hadar's reply was immediate and devastating.

Culsten fell back awkwardly into his chair when the bridge shook as if it was situated on top of an erupting volcano. He suppressed a yelp of pain.

Wenera sat next to him, seemingly holding on to dear life. The fear in her eyes was hardly to be missed. She had never witnessed an attack from the bridge, the place where all decisions that would mean the difference between life and death for the entire crew took place. She had never had the time to worry about those things when busy in sickbay. She was used to placing her trust in the skills and wisdom of the people who made those decisions. But now that she was here and she could see first-hand that Lif Culsten might not be up to the challenge of defending all their lives, the fear of death had become a very real concept.

"Are you all right?" she said.

He nodded but didn't take his eyes off the viewscreen.

She leaned closer to him. "Lif," she whispered.

He turned to look at her, for the first time noticing the doubt etched on her face.

"Can we win this?"

He didn't have an answer and he cursed himself for that. He knew that no matter how grave the situation, Captain Owens would not have hesitated to imbue confidence into his crew.

He could bear her asking expression no longer and turned away. "What is the status of those ships?"

Trinik replied. "Minor damage to the lead vessel. The secondary ship is undamaged."

"Stanmore, our status?"

"Shields at seventy-five percent."

Everybody on the bridge did the math at the same time. *Eagle* was in serious trouble. And the Jem'Hadar were not going to stop. They emphasized this point when both vessels swung back around to face down the Federation ship once more.

Stanmore turned away from his console to look at Culsten's empty expression. "I suggest we break orbit. We cannot fight them effectively while we're a sitting duck."

It was an option Culsten had already considered. But he also knew that if he left Ligos IV now, he would lose all hopes of re-establishing communications with the landing party or the team he had sent to rescue it.

"Ensign, evasive pattern Echelon five, use some of that lateral space to escape," Culsten said as he felt his mouth surprisingly dry. "Mister Trinik, fire quantum torpedoes, heavy spread."

Again the officers around him responded instantaneously to the new commands and for a moment new hope gripped the acting captain. In his mind, he could see his strategy working as long as the Jem'Hadar would keep to their current attack plan. He knew he wouldn't be able to destroy them but he could buy some more time.

*Eagle* broke off hard to the left and fired eight bright blue torpedoes. But the Jem'Hadar had no intention of playing Culsten's game. Instead, they broke formation, creating a wide margin between them, avoiding most of the incoming projectiles. They promptly regrouped to concentrate their fire on one single spot.

An EPS conduit ruptured near the viewscreen causing a small explosion that threw the Srena out of her seat. The bridge quickly filled with acrid smoke and the smell of burned wires and insulation. The fire suppression system swiftly put out the flames but a smoldering fissure running along the floor and bulkhead remained.

Wenera jumped to her feet and rushed toward the fallen helmsman. She had her medical tricorder in hand and scanned the seemingly unconscious Andorian.

Culsten watched in terror, his heart now beating faster as the scene seemed only too reminiscent of the last death *Eagle*'s bridge crew had suffered when Ensign Rei had been killed just a few meters away from where Srena lay now. Except that this death would have been on his hands.

After overcoming the initial shock his next instinct was to take the now empty helm station, the place where he felt most at home. He fought the urge when he realized with immeasurable relief that Srena was getting back on her feet. She wiped away some blood from her face and slipped

back into her seat. Wenera appeared as if she wanted to protest but one look at the viewscreen changed her mind. The Jem'Hadar were coming back to finish the job.

"Ventral shields are below twenty percent," Trinik said. "We will incur heavy damage if we allow another hit in the weakened area."

The doctor stepped right in front of Culsten, almost blocking his line of sight of the main viewer. "Lif," she said. "We need to break orbit."

"Please, doctor," he said and gently pushed her aside. "Srena, take us into the atmosphere, thirty-five-degree angle."

"What?" she said and looked at him with confusion.

"Just do it"

She nodded and returned to her controls to lower the ship's nose.

"Full impulse."

*Eagle* shot toward the surface, running like hell from the pursuing starships. The only problem with this plan—and everybody on the bridge seemed to know this—was that *Eagle* could not hope to survive such a maneuver. It was a starship after all, never built or conceived to enter a planet's atmosphere. Neither shields nor the hull would be able to absorb the stress and heat of such a steep entry angle.

"What are you doing?" Wenera said quietly. She had figured by the crew's reaction that whatever Culsten had *Eagle* do would most likely end poorly.

"I'm doing what I know best," he said. "I'm thinking like a pilot."

"Lif," Srena said, "this isn't a shuttle. This is a three million metric ton starship. It hasn't been designed for atmospheric flight."

He decided to ignore her observation. Instead, he noticed with satisfaction that his plan was paying off. At least for now. The Jem'Hadar had not expected this seemingly irrational move and were momentarily stunned with indecision. Then one of the two ships broke off to follow *Eagle* in pursuit while the other remained in orbit.

"Structural integrity is reaching critical levels," said Stanmore in a clearly worried tone of voice.

"Divert all auxiliary power to structural integrity," Culsten said.

Stanmore shook his head. "It won't be enough. If we maintain this angle of attack and speed we will hit the hard deck in less than two minutes. We will be crushed like an eggshell."

Wenera's eyes widened but she bit her tongue when she noticed Culsten's determined expression.

"Mister Trinik, can you lock on to the pursuing vessel?"

"Negative. Computer lock is not responding."

Culsten could feel the perspiration forming on his brow. The temperature had nearly tripled over the last few seconds. The environmental systems were unable to compensate any longer. He could feel the deck plates rumbling disturbingly, protesting the immense stress they were being put under.

"Lock on manually and prepare to fire a full spread."

"Thirty seconds to hard deck," Stiller said, his voice rising.

A sudden and violent jerk almost threw Culsten to the ground.

"The navigational deflector has failed," Srena said without being able to keep her voice free of the panic she was feeling.

Sweat pearls dropped into Culsten's eyes. "Mister Trinik, do you have a lock?"

"Negative, still compensating for atmospheric interference."

"Hard deck in twenty seconds, we need to pull up now."

"Trinik!"

"Partial lock achieved."

"Good enough. Open fire. Srena, bring her up. Hard."

Culsten held his breath as he could hear the deck plates rattling below him. The viewscreen showed nothing but a red and yellow inferno of fire and flames. He couldn't tell if they were still plunging toward the surface or climbing back to the stars.

"We have partial sensors failure," Stanmore said.

They were blind. They didn't know where they were or where they were going.

"Srena."

But the Andorian officer didn't reply. Her focus was glued on her instrument, her fingers racing across the panels.

Culstne couldn't be sure but it felt as if the temperature was dropping again.

And then another eruption ripped him out of his seat and he landed painfully on the floor of the bridge. He tried to get back onto his feet but that proved to be a difficult struggle with the immense forces pulling onto the ship. "What was that?"

"Sensors indicate a large explosion within a sixty-thousand-meter radius," Trinik said doing his best to decipher the limited information his console would provide him.

"The Jem'Hadar ship?" Culsten said.

"A likely explanation."

Culsten glanced back at the viewscreen that had now finally cleared. It showed the final stages of an explosion within the lower orbit of the red planet. From its size and pattern, he knew it could only have been a starship. Some of the torpedoes Trinik had fired had impacted on the severely weakened forward shields and hull of the Jem'Hadar ship, ripping it apart instantly.

The viewscreen shifted to show a sight Culsten had never been happier to see. The stars.

"Incoming transmission," Trinik said

Culsten couldn't believe it. Had his reckless maneuver discouraged the Jem'Hadar so much that they were now willing to surrender? Was it possible that against all odds he would leave this arena triumphant?

"On screen."

"Audio only."

"Eagle this is Captain Owens, do you copy?"

Culsten couldn't quite place how he felt about hearing the captain's voice coming over the speakers. Relieved, certainly. His worst fears had been that Owens and the entire senior crew had been killed. But a Jem'Hadar surrender would remain nothing but a pleasant fantasy.

"Sir, it's good to hear your voice. Are you all right?" he said and immediately stood up straighter as if Owens could somehow judge his posture over the audio link.

"We are mostly okay," said Owens. Interference was making it difficult to pick up his every word, however. "Listen carefully, Lieutenant. This outpost is under Jem'Hadar attack and it is absolutely vital that we repel the Jem'Hadar forces. In order to do this, we will need reinforcements from Eagle."

Culsten couldn't suppress the urge to swallow. The captain needed his help and he didn't have the first idea of how to provide it given the circumstances.

"Lif."

Wenera diverted his attention back to the viewscreen. The second Jem'Hadar vessel was bearing down on them now as they reentered higher orbit. It was close. Very close.

"Full evasive. Fire all weapons."

The ship lurched as it tried to get out of harm's way. With the protective forces of the structural integrity field still recovering from the previous maneuver, Culsten had difficulties maintaining his balance.

*Eagle* fired at the same time as the Jem'Hadar did.

Culsten fell into the center seat as their opponents executed a strafing attack. The bridge heaved, consoles and lights flickered on and off. Sparks flew.

"Ventral shields have collapsed, hull fractures on deck twelve and thirteen," said Trinik, maintaining his Vulcan control admirably.

"What is going on up there?" Owens said.

"Sir, we're under Jem'Hadar attack ourselves. I don't think—" he stopped himself. The last thing he wanted to do was to fail the captain. But one look at the faces of the men and women around him confirmed what he already knew to be true. Right now, *Eagle* could not help anyone. He wasn't even sure if they could help themselves.

"Lieutenant," Owens said and then paused for a few moments as if distracted by something else. "Protect the ship. I need you to survive and I need this outpost to survive. If you cannot—"

A spike of loud and unintelligible noise drowned out the captain's voice. Ominous silence followed.

"Captain? Sir? Please say again. Captain?"

"The connection has been terminated at the source," Trinik said.

Culsten balled his hands into fists. He needed the captain. He needed his help and his guidance. He needed Owens to tell him exactly what he wanted his ship to do. Protect the ship and the outpost. Under the current situation, there was no way he could do that. And on the viewscreen, the barely damaged Jem'Hadar ship was preparing for another devastating pass.

Then he realized. There was only one choice to be made.

He stood with newfound determination. "Ensign Srena, come about," he said in a firm tone. "We're breaking orbit. Best speed."

\* \* \*

"What's going on up there?"

Owens was of course relieved to find out that his worst nightmares had not come true. His ship was still there and therefore their chances of defending Epsilon Twelve from the Jem'Hadar onslaught and surviving the attack were still in good shape.

But something was happening to *Eagle*. Culsten's voice sounded obviously stressed and the distinct sounds and voices in the background could mean only one thing.

"Sir, we are under Jem'Hadar attack ourselves. I don't think—"

*Eagle* was fighting for survival; Owens knew right away. And he cursed himself for it. For the fact that he had been so reckless and left his ship in a time of war, leaving it in the hands of the inexperienced helmsman. He knew he would do the best job he knew how but the fear that it might not be enough he couldn't shake.

"Lieutenant," he started but then stopped again when he caught a glimpse of Captain Zalak who stood just a few meters out, covering an intersection. The emergency transmitter had been placed quite thoughtlessly into a wall panel in a standard corridor, easily accessible but with little to no cover. Zalak, Tren, and Nora provided cover while Owens was speaking to the ship.

The Bolian had suddenly turned to face him and he couldn't quite tell why. Jana Tren stood at the opposite side of the corridor, guarding their rear. Zalak was looking directly at her.

Owens continued but kept his eyes on the station commander. "Protect the ship. I need you to survive and I need this outpost to survive. If you cannot—"

A purple-hued energy blast hit the receiver and Owens jumped back as he was showered by hot sparks. Zalak fired his weapon and Owens knew instantly who his target was.

Jana.

He swung around trying to warn her even though already aware that he was going to be too late.

The discharge of Zalak's weapon missed the Betazoid by mere centimeters. Instead, it connected with the broad chest of a de-shrouding Jem'Hadar who was making his way toward the Starfleet team. He collapsed instantly.

"We're under attack, multiple hostiles," Nora shouted from her position near the intersecting corridors.

Of course, by then neither Owens nor anybody else had to be told. He gripped his rifle and hurried over to Tren who had already opened fire at several other approaching Jem'Hadar.

Zalak and Nora were engaging the Jem'Hadar approaching from the opposite side.

Unbridled fear gripped Owens when he noticed the gray-colored soldier lunge toward Jana Tren. She had managed to cut down the first Jem'Hadar trying to reach her by shooting him at point-blank range but didn't have the time to defend herself against the second. Owens was fairly certain that the petite Betazoid was no match for the two-hundred-plus pound pure muscle, killing machine bearing down on her.

He raised his rifle as he ran for her but couldn't get a clear shot.

Jana didn't wait for her enemy to come to her. She practically jumped at him, lashing out with the butt of her weapon, connecting it with his lower jar. She flipped over the rifle so that the emitter cone stabbed into the dazed Jem'Hadar's chest. She fired and the soldier's body jerked backward from the close proximity blast.

He reached her not a second later. His astonishment left him speechless. She had disposed of two attackers before he had been able to engage just one.

"Watch out," she shouted, pushed him aside, and fired again, this time hitting a Jem'Hadar that had taken aim at the Starfleet captain.

"You're good," he said.

She shot him a quick smile. "Thank you for noticing."

But he didn't have time for more compliments. Two more Jem'Hadar had appeared and he had to dive for cover before returning fire. Tren squeezed in tight next to him inside an empty door arch. For just an instance the sweet smell of her fragrance distracted his mind, forcing him to remember the many good times they had once shared. It was the entirely wrong time for nostalgia, he swiftly reminded himself.

She didn't seem to notice. She pushed past him and fired a couple of blasts into the corridor and toward their advancing enemy. "Just like old times, huh?"

He joined her in returning fire. "I don't remember us ever slaying any Jem'Hadar."

"No," she said as she pushed back into cover. "No Jem'Hadar but plenty of dragons."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he said and shot her a sidelong glance.

She smiled and fired again, finding her target and taking it out. She took a small breath. "There's something I need to tell you," she said as she pressed herself back against the wall next to him.

He considered her expectantly.

"I know it might sound selfish, especially because the chances that we'll die here look pretty damned good right about now."

"Don't say that."

She locked eyes with him. "But I'm glad it's you."

He didn't find words and he didn't have much time to search for them either. At least two more Jem'Hadar were approaching and they were lusting for their blood. He went into a crouch and fired. "Live apart, die together, is that it?" he said over his shoulder.

"Something like that," she said and joined him targeting the advancing enemy.

Nora was cut off from Owens and Tren and she didn't like it. But at least a dozen Jem'Hadar soldiers were trying to get past her and she couldn't allow for that to happen.

Her only help in holding her side of the corridor was Captain Zalak and he had quickly proven to be an exceptional combat officer. She had to admit she was impressed. Not only had he dealt the opening salvo against their attackers, he had also managed to pick up at least two others, keeping the Jem'Hadar pinned down at an intersection about ten meters away.

But she had a good idea of how their enemy liked to fight and so she wasn't surprised when they suddenly ceased fire. She knew what was coming. They were charging and Nora would not be able to see them coming.

She shot a look in Zalak's direction who stood at the opposite wall. He seemed to understand what the Jem'Hadar were up to and began to peddle backward slowly.

Nora mirrored the move. Then she stopped, controlled her breathing, and closed her eyes.

There was still the noise of battle coming from somewhere behind her but she managed to filter it out and focus entirely on what was happening directly in front.

Then she heard the footsteps. Her weapon began to track the invisible movements. Nora opened her eyes finding exactly what she had anticipated.

Nothing.

She fired.

The beam of her weapon made contact and the charging Jem'Hadar became visible as his lifeless body collapsed. After that, it was really just a blur.

Five or six Jem'Hadar appeared out of seemingly thin air and she responded on instinct alone. Cutting down one soldier at a time until firing her weapon stopped to be practical and she was forced into hand-to-hand combat.

She didn't think about her movements, didn't plan or strategize but purely acted and reacted to her enemies. She ignored the piercing pain that shot through her limbs when something sharp sliced through the fabric of her uniform. She didn't look at the damage done, didn't even acknowledge it. Instead, she continued to do what she had done all her life. She fought until she could not fight anymore.

In the end, there was only one Jem'Hadar left standing and before she could reach him, he was cut down from behind. Zalak had disposed of him, holding his rifle he threw her an encouraging look. "You certainly know how to handle yourself in a fight."

Nora looked him over. It took her a few seconds to realize that he had come away from the battle much better than she had. While she was bleeding from several wounds on her arms and legs, he seemed mostly uninjured. She knew why. He was a decent shot with a phaser but he was no fighter and while she had gone in close to do the dirty work, he had lingered in the background, waiting for opportunities to pick off the enemy. She had a word for that.

"Are you all right?" he said as he stepped closer.

She tried to nod stoically but when she attempted to take a step she came to realize that all the strength had drained out of her body and she sagged to the floor.

Zalak took his time to help her, first checking his surroundings to make sure no more Jem'Hadar were lying in wait for him to lower his guard. Then, when satisfied that the battle was over, he slowly approached her.

"Captain?"

The Bolian turned to see Owens and Tren approach.

"I think your officer requires assistance," Zalak said, gesturing at Nora.

Owens immediately took a knee next to the battered security chief.

"I'm glad she was here," Zalak continued as Owens checked her over. "Without her, the Jem'Hadar would have most certainly overrun us."

"Laas?" Owens said softly, looking into her half-open eyes.

She nodded slowly. "I'm all right, sir."

Tren looked over the many dead bodies surrounding them. "She killed all these?"

"I helped somewhat," Zolak said, flashing her a sly grin.

Owens took off his uniform jacket and tore it to pieces to make makeshift bandages for Nora. "We can't stay here," he said. "You think you can walk?"

"Just ... just give me a minute."

Owens smiled. "Take two." He stood and turned to Tren and Zalak, his face quickly taking on a more sober expression.

"You spoke to your ship," Zalak said. "The word is bad?"

"It isn't good," Owens said. "I don't think we can expect reinforcements anytime soon."

"So where does that leave us?" Tren said.

Owens didn't have an immediate answer at hand. Without *Eagle*, he knew their chances for survival were minuscule at best. It already bordered on a miracle that they had just survived a Jem'Hadar attack that had clearly been designed to kill them all. It wouldn't take very long for their enemy to learn that their ambush had failed. Their next strike would come soon and it would come hard. And it would take more than what they had to fight them back again.

"For now, I suggest we retreat to the auxiliary control room and figure out what to do from there."

"Agreed," Zalak said.

"What are we waiting for then?"

Owens turned, surprised to find Nora back on her feet and ready to move. Moments later they had left the battlefield behind.

\* \* \*

The sight of the ominous Jem'Hadar attack fighter was increasingly growing larger on the viewscreen of the USS *Eagle*. The Starfleet ship was pushing its impulse drives to its limits but it didn't appear to be enough to escape their much better-shaped attackers.

Wenera found it difficult to concentrate on anything else but the closing enemy. She couldn't understand their relentlessness. Wasn't it possible to find some sort of agreement with their opponent that would not end in their utter annihilation? Surely there were matters on which they could find common ground. It was an idealistic notion, of course, and even Wenera realized that at that moment it was hopelessly naïve. The Dominion was not interested in any talk that wasn't related in some form or other to their unconditional surrender. She knew that was not an option.

"The Jem'Hadar vessel is now within primary weapons range," Stanmore said from OPS. "And closing."

"They are opening fire," said Trinik from tactical.

Wenera held on tightly to her armrests as the ship shuddered in sync with the image of purplish energy beams lashing out from their pursuers.

A few meters in front of her, Srena turned to look in her direction with an anxious expression. She needed orders nobody was giving her.

Wenera herself turned to look to her right but found the seat in the center empty. A sudden flash of panic gripped the physician as she felt entirely alone in *Eagle*'s command area. She quickly stood and turned to the back of the bridge. Immediately behind her stood Trinik who also looked upon her with expecting eyes. She didn't know what to do. She was a

doctor and not trained for command, nobody could expect her to run a starship, no less one under attack.

She found Culsten sitting at one of the aft science stations, lining the back wall of the bridge. She hastily joined him and sat down on the seat next to him. The silver-haired Krellonian seemed oblivious to the threat they were facing; his eyes focused on the screen in front of him.

"Please tell me you have a plan," she said almost pleadingly.

But the junior lieutenant didn't reply.

"Lif."

He turned to look at her. "Doc, I think I might have found a way out of this."

The ship rocked again.

"Aft shields at fifty-six percent and falling," Trinik said. His voice had lost some of its previous calmness. An inkling of the fact that the young Vulcan was not as well trained at hiding his emotions as some of his older kinsmen.

"Then by all means don't just sit there but do something," Wenera said.

He gave her a firm nod and then stood from his seat to walk back to the command area. "Helm, adjust our heading to four-seven mark two-eight-seven. Give it all she's got."

Srena instantly complied, relieved to have finally been given instructions.

"These coordinated will put us on a collision course with Ligos VIII," Stanmore said.

"I know."

Wenera, who had followed Culsten, couldn't believe her ears. "That's your plan? To crash us into a planet?"

"Not us, doctor."

She didn't understand.

"I suggest you take a seat," he said and then turned back to the face the screen. "Ligos VIII is a small planet with an unusually high gravitational force."

"I'm obviously not an astrophysicist but I thought you need a lot of size to create high gravity."

"It's one element," said Stanmore as he checked his instruments. "Ligos VIII makes up for its small size with a very high mass and a highly dense and solid core."

Culsten nodded. "Our fortunes may be changing. Srena," he said. "I want you to execute a Fossett Turn. Are you familiar with it?"

She considered him for a moment, her eyes growing slightly larger, her blue forehead glistening with perspiration. "Isn't that one of those crazy maneuvers that got you in trouble in Nova?"

"If you prefer, I can take the helm for this one."

"Not a chance," she said without a second's worth of consideration. "I'll do it," she added with utter confidence and focused her attention back onto her station.

Culstne took the center chair. He knew he wouldn't want to stay on his feet for this one. He noticed Wenera's puzzled expression. "Trust me," he said. "The less you know about this, the better you'll feel."

"I doubt it," she said.

"We are approaching Ligos VIII. We should be in position within one minute," Srena said. "Nobody blink or you'll miss this."

The viewscreen was now centered on a small planetoid that did not appear to be much different in appearance from Earth's moon except for one very important disparity. Even though it had a relatively small mass, Ligos VIII possessed a gravity pull more than five times that of Earth and *Eagle* was already subject to the effects as the ship gained speed. Culsten knew that for this maneuver to work they would have to go a lot faster.

"Lieutenant Stanmore, transfer all available power to the internal dampening field. Lieutenant Trinik, ready a full spread of quantum torpedoes to be fired at the conclusion of the turn."

The two officers quickly acknowledged.

"Ten seconds," Srena said. "I guess this is a bad time to point out that my call sign used to be *Crash*."

Culsten decided to ignore her statement. "Doc, I suggest you hold on," he said, reaching out for his armrests.

Wenera hastily followed suit.

"Position reached."

"Warp speed," Culsten said.

"What?" But Wenera's protestations came too late.

*Eagle* jumped to warp at what in cosmic terms equaled a stone's throw away from a planetary body. But the ship remained at warp for less than a nanosecond. Just long enough to bridge a gap of seventy-thousand kilometers nearly instantaneously.

The moment the ship dropped out of warp the powerful gravimetric forces of the planet took full effect, pulling *Eagle* toward it at speeds in excess of one hundred thousand kilometers per second. Even with the dampening field working overtime the crew could feel the gravitational forces pressing them into their seats. The viewscreen mirrored an image of incredible speed as the ship slung-shot around the backside of the planetoid.

Srena kicked in the impulse drive just in time to push the ship away from the planet again and head-on toward the Jem'Hadar ship that until seconds ago had been in hot pursuit.

Trinik recognized his cue as well and fired the torpedoes. Not all the bright blue anti-matter-packed projectiles found their target but the ones that did were more than enough to cause the Jem'Hadar to momentarily lose navigational control. A moment too long.

The planet's dense gravity pulled at the smaller ship just like it had at *Eagle*. But the Jem'Hadar were utterly unprepared for the effect and lacked the time to adapt. The Federation ship shot passed the bug-shaped fighter as it tumbled directly toward the planetoid's surface.

*Eagle*'s crew watched with rapt fascination as the ship tried unsuccessfully to free itself from its inevitable doom. All their efforts remained in vain and it crashed into the surface without much spectacle, as the ship was completely enveloped in a large cloud of dust and dirt. Even if the impact had not killed everyone on board, the chances that the ship would ever be spaceworthy again were next to none.

A cheer ripped through *Eagle*'s bridge. Culsten couldn't contain his excitement either. His first combat mission had ended in a decisive victory mostly thanks to his plans.

He approached Srena with a beaming smile. "I don't think I could have done a better job!"

She mirrored his smile, her cheeks blushing slightly she felt too proud to ruin the moment with a snappy reply.

Culsten looked around. "You all did a great job. All of you."

Wenera stood herself, ready to congratulate the man she now shamefully admitted to herself she had doubted just a few minutes earlier.

Culsten noticed one person on the bridge whose spirits had apparently been unaffected by their victory. He hadn't really expected much else from the Vulcan but he was surprised to find him look even gloomier than he had before. "Come on, Trinik, you got to admit that we did good."

But the tactical officer didn't speak instead his eyes were focused on his console.

The silence quickly started to worry Culsten. He knew the Jem'Hadar ship couldn't have possibly survived that impact. He took a small step toward the tactical station. "Trinik?"

He slowly raised his head to meet Culsten's glance. When he spoke, he sounded as if he hadn't wished to speak at all. "New contacts, bearing two-eight-one mark one-seven-three."

Then he noticed Wenera's empty expression and he turned to follow her stare, already suspecting that he wouldn't like what he was going to find.

He couldn't have been more right.

"Two Jem'Hadar attack vessels," Trinik said, providing unnecessary commentary to the disheartening image on the screen.

Culsten sagged down into the center chair.

"Time to intercept: Fifteen minutes, thirty-eight seconds."

And just like that Lif Culsten's formerly sky-high mood crashed as hard as that Jem'Hadar fighter had moments earlier.

He closed his eyes hoping for nothing more than this being a cruel nightmare from which he would awake any moment. Because in reality, he knew that there weren't nearly enough death-defying maneuvers in his repertoire that could keep them alive against such overwhelming odds.

## XI – STAKES

Xylion hadn't had much luck trying to utilize the limited computer stations available in the auxiliary control room to gain a better picture of their current situation. Without main power most of the more sophisticated functions of Epsilon Twelve were unavailable and interference from an unknown source prevented any attempts at regular communication.

But the Vulcan had not given up. Instead, he had begun to improvise. He had found that besides weapons a great number of other equipment had been delivered to the auxiliary control room, including many tricorders. Just one of the hand scanners was not sufficient to overcome whatever interference was causing their problems. The solution seemed perfectly logical. Instead of using one tricorder, Xylion had decided to use seven, daisy chained to increase both scanning effectiveness and range.

The next problem was power. He knew he needed a lot more than the small hand-held devices could generate if he held out any hope of their combined sensors to yield any results. He found an equally simple solution to that problem.

If there was something they possessed in abundance, it was weapons. Crate after crate seemed to be filled with side arms, compression rifles, or type-three combat phasers. And each of them was powered by freshly-charged energy cells. Xylion had removed many of them to essentially create a powerful independent power supply for his makeshift sensor array.

He had cleared a large, table-like computer station that was now packed with tricorders, pads, and power cells all connected by several different colored wires. The entire apparatus looked more at home in a junkyard than at a Starfleet facility.

Its appearance of course was inconsequential; all that mattered was that it worked. And that it did.

"Did you find out anything yet?" said Ensign Germaine McAllister. The young twenty-something officer was one of about twenty station personnel who had been successfully resuscitated. Most of them had been given weapons and tasked to protect the control room.

Xylion looked up at the dark-skinned officer. His head was completely shaved causing the dim light to reflect from the polished surface. He possessed an athletic body and the gold undershirt he wore led Xylion to assume that the man was part of the station's security detail. "Perhaps."

McAllister nodded. "I hope it will help us contact your ship. The sooner we get off the rock the better."

Xylion continued to study his findings. "It is improbable that we will be able to contact *Eagle* with this array. Our best chance at this time is for Captain Owens to establish communications by using the emergency transmitter."

The ensign stepped closer. "Your captain," McAllister said. "I don't think Monroe thinks very highly of him."

"Lieutenant Commander Monroe's personal feelings regarding Captain Owens are not pertinent."

"Of course," he said and then made sure that nobody was in earshot before speaking up again. "Don't get me wrong, sir. I'm on your side. To be honest, I don't trust Monroe."

Xylion cocked an eyebrow in response.

McAllister took it as a sign to continue. "I mean I know she's ambitious, that's obvious but there is something off about her, I can't quite put my finger on it."

Xylion returned his attention to his instruments. "It is not appropriate for you to cast aspersions on a superior superior officer."

The ensign nodded slowly. "You're right."

"Where is the Lieutenant Commander?"

He shrugged. "I haven't got a clue. I haven't seen her in almost half an hour."

As if on cue, the heavy doors to the control room opened to allow Shelby Monroe to enter. She quickly surveyed the room and then approached Xylion and McAllister.

"Speak of the devil," McAllister said and quickly shrank away as if he wanted to avoid standing in her way. Xylion did not show a similar concern.

"I have secured the immediate area and positioned men at all major access points leading to the control room. The Jem'Hadar will not be able to surprise us again. Have you heard anything from your people yet?" she asked briskly. The tone of her voice left no doubt that she considered herself in charge now.

"Communication is still not possible and neither team has reported back yet," Xylion said.

"I don't like it," Monroe said and began to pace behind the Vulcan. "And I don't like to sit on my hands and do nothing while we're under siege," she stopped when she realized how much attention he was giving his apparatus. "Have you made any progress with this?"

"Rudimentary scans of our immediate surroundings seem to hint toward a large concentration of trithium radiation."

"There has been trithium here ever since the base was built," McAllister said. "We're sitting right on top of an old mine."

"My sensors show more than the acceptable levels of trithium radiation previously observed on this planet. Surface radiation has never surpassed 70 kilogray. According to my data, we are currently exposed to an estimated 0.32 gigagray."

"What?" Germaine McAllister couldn't manage to keep his voice from spiking. "Is it lethal?" he said, exhibiting slightly more control.

"I cannot be certain without further tests," Xylion said.

Monroe began to massage her forehead. "How is that even possible? Surely the planet did not just grow a massive amount of trithium ore."

"The only possible explanation is that the radiation is being enhanced artificially."

"The Jem'Hadar," McAllister said.

"That would be a logical assumption."

Shelby Monroe stepped next to Xylion and began to study his findings. None of what she saw seemed to make much sense to her and she turned to look at the science officer. "Is there something we can do?"

"A release of polarized photon particles should in theory lessen the effects of trithium radiation. However, considering the intensity of the radiation I do not believe that we could hope for anything more than a temporary solution."

"We don't need more than a temporary solution," McAllister said and looked at Monroe. "Just enough time to beam us all out of here."

"Or beam reinforcements in," said Monroe. "Could you release these photon particles from here?"

"No. Even if main power was reestablished, this control room does not allow access to the required systems."

"There is a sensor emitter access module on this deck. Could you do it from there?"

"Possibly."

"It's located at the opposite end of this level but I think we should be able to get there undetected."

"There is no guarantee that I will be able to initiate a photon particle burst without main power. I suggest we wait until Captain Owens returns or Commander Edison's team reestablishes main power," Xylion said.

She shook her head. "It's time we start being more proactive, Commander. I will do this myself if I have to but I'd rather have somebody with me who knows exactly what he's doing," she said and raised her phaser rifle to indicate her readiness to move out again.

Xylion seemed to consider his options for a moment. He attached a tricorder to his waist and reached for a phaser. "Your chances of success will improve if I join you."

Monroe smirked. "Good," she said and looked at McAllister. "Ensign, I'm placing you in command while we're gone. Your orders are simple. Hold."

McAllister nodded curtly and then watched silently as the two senior officers hurried out of the main doors.

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It was frustrating but there wasn't much to do for Edison. Together with DeMara Deen, he had managed the gruesome task of removing the bodies of the slain engineers from the reactor deck, to free up room but mostly to allow Hopkins to fully concentrate on repairing the main generators without being distracted by the terrible fate that had befallen her predecessors.

He had to admit that he had been surprised by the young Tenarian's ability to emotionally distance herself from what they had to do. When he had first met her, three years earlier, he would have never imagined that the sensitive and delicate young woman would ever be able to process the cruelties the universe held in store. But Deen had come a long way and now was able to control her emotions as easily as pressing a button. Or so it seemed.

Hopkins on the other hand had not yet learned to be that effective but Edison did not doubt that she soon would. Fortunately for their mission, the chief engineer possessed one significant skill. When she was faced with challenging work, she rarely found time to focus on anything other than the job before her.

And therefore when Edison decided to check on her progress he found her working feverishly at the base of one of the tree-high generators. She had removed most of the access panels to allow her to reconfigure the circuitry.

"How are you coming along?"

Hopkins, whose upper body was halfway buried inside the generator, jumped so suddenly that she hit her head against a metal grate. She swore under her breath as she crawled out of the generator.

He managed to wipe his smile off his face as soon as she had cleared the casing. "I apologize; I didn't mean to startle you."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Of course you didn't and yet you somehow manage to do it every time."

"I'm here to see if you need help with anything," he said, considering the many parts she had removed from the generator. He had a basic understanding of engineering of course but he had to admit that the schematics for a class V double fusion reactor currently eluded him.

"I've already told Dee. I think I'll make better progress if I handle this by myself."

He nodded understandingly. "What's the prognosis so far?"

"The bad news is that whoever shut these babies down," she said and tapped the six-meter-tall reactor, "didn't intend for them to ever work again."

"What's the good news?"

"I don't think they knew the first thing about cold fusion mechanics."

"So you can rectify the damage?"

Hopkins smiled. "I believe so. I just need some time."

"You know we might not have much of that."

She nodded. "Even more reason to let me get back to do my job," she said briskly but then seemed to be regretting the brisk attitude.

Edison smiled and nodded. He turned away but then stopped and returned to face her once more. "Before I forget," he said. "There is something I found that I thought might help you."

She gave him a quizzical look. She was certain Deen had already handed her all the tools they had been able to find.

Edison raised his hand to present her with a steel and plastic device about fifteen centimeters long. It had a yellow handle attached to a narrow axial shaft with a flat tip.

"What is this?" she said with an immediate interest and took it off his hand.

"I thought you would know."

She inspected the small device with great fascination. "It's a screwdriver. I haven't seen one of those in years," she said with obvious awe in her voice.

His smile widened. "I know you like to use old tools so when I found this, I thought it might help."

She looked at him. "Do you have any idea what the practical value of such an instrument could be when trying to fix one of these generators?"

"Tell me."

"Absolutely none."

"Oh."

"But I appreciate the gesture," she said before she crawled back into the reactor to resume her work. She kept the screwdriver with her.

Edison turned and headed for the ladder leading him out of the room.

"Oh and Commander? You promised me a wrench. This is not a wrench."

He was already on the first rung of the ladder. "I think given the circumstances I've done pretty good," he said and continued climbing.

He did not see her beaming smile.

"There's just no pleasing some people," Edison said as he stepped back out into the main control room of the engineering deck that was still effectively cut off from the rest of the station by the two large blast doors.

Deen was sitting at one of the few operational control panels, trying to access any of the station's inoperative systems. She ignored his entrance and his remark. In fact, she appeared rather distracted and not necessarily by her workstation.

He noticed this and sat down next to her. "Are you all right?"

She turned to look at him as if seeing him for the first time. She managed a small smile. "Sure. As far as one might be given the fact that we're surrounded by merciless killing machines dead set on eviscerating us."

"Point taken."

She turned her seat to face him. "Commander, can I ask you a question?"

"You don't need to ask, Dee."

"It's somewhat personal."

He gestured for her to continue.

"How do you figure your relationship with Laas will work out in the long run?"

He looked dumbfounded. He had not expected the question to be that personal. "You know about me and Laas?"

She uttered a laugh. "You didn't seriously think you could keep something like that a secret on *Eagle*, did you?"

"No," he said to himself. "I guess that was a foolish notion."

"I'm sorry," she said regretfully. "I could have put that more tactfully."

He made a dismissive motion. "No, don't worry about it. And to be honest, I don't even care anymore who knows about it."

She nodded as she looked deep into his eyes. "You love her, don't you?"

"Yes."

"When did you know?"

He was about to reply when he stopped himself, giving her a suspicious look instead. "Why do you ask?"

As if found out she quickly turned away, returning her focus to her workstation. "No reason."

"Oh no, I opened up to you and now it's your turn," he said. "What is it?"

She swallowed and kept her glance cast downward and away from him. "I think I might be in love with the captain."

Edison laughed out loudly immediately eliciting an evil eye from the young lieutenant.

"That's not funny."

"I apologize," he said and raised his hands defensively. "It's just the way you said it. I guess this might help to explain your odd behavior over the last few days."

She shrugged.

"You and the captain are very close, why do you think this revelation is such a problem?"

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "You're kidding, right? First of all, he's the captain and I'm one of his officers. And yes, we're close but not like that. In human terms, I was a child when we first met. He sees me like a daughter."

He nodded understandingly.

"And then there is Donners."

"Captain Donners?"

"Yes. I don't know the details but they have history. And let's not forget Agent Tren. Michael is practically eating out of her palm ever since she has shown up. Haven't you noticed?" She sounded uncharacteristically frustrated. "And the truth is, I'm not even sure how I feel. I mean..." she paused as she thought about her next words carefully. "It's all very confusing. I've known him for such a long time. I don't even know if I mistake love for affection."

He didn't reply right away. This was a lot of information to digest for any person. Especially since it came as such a surprise to him. Like most on the ship, he had known that DeMara Deen was the person closest to Owens but he had never suspected these types of feelings from her. Perhaps because of her background. She probably could have had any man she desired. Any man, except perhaps for the one she truly wanted.

She smiled with embarrassment as she realized what she had just confessed. Something that up until that point she hadn't even confessed to herself. "Here we are, close to being massacred by the Jem'Hadar, and I go on about my frustratingly confusing love life. I'm so sorry," she said and quickly turned away.

He gently put a hand on her shoulder. "Dee, I know from my own experience that the best way to face a personal crisis is to talk about it. And I'm honored that you trust me enough that you have chosen to confide in me. But allow me to make a suggestion. Let's worry about survival today and your complicated feelings for Captain Owens tomorrow."

She nodded. "Deal."

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The stale and hot air of Ligos IV gave the hilly landscape an almost frozen appearance. The treetops stood perfectly still, no bush or fern swayed in the slightest. And there was no animal life to speak of. If any living being was trying to approach Epsilon Twelve by foot, First Teleka'clan would have been able to spot it easily from his position, twenty meters above ground on the battle cruiser's observation terrace.

He had been scanning the surrounding hills and forests with great attention for the last ten minutes but so far had been unable to detect any kind of movement. He was certain that his superior genetically engineered vision would immediately alert him to the slightest disturbance to the natural landscape.

"We have detected the remains of one Federation shuttlecraft but no signs of survivors," said Second Arak'ikar who stood next to the First, patiently awaiting his new instructions.

"Just one?" He knew that two shuttles had left the Starfleet ship in orbit and had been engaged by their missile batteries. However, their limited scanning capabilities had made it difficult to verify their destruction.

"We cannot be certain if we destroyed both vessels yet. It would require more men," the second-in-command said.

The Jem'Hadar First did not reply as he continued to survey the surroundings.

"If we have more men, we could mount a much more effective search and hunt down any possible survivors."

"No," Telaka'clan said briskly, never lowering the binoculars. "The Vorta's instructions were clear. Our forces are not to be drawn away from the ship or our main objective." What that main objective was exactly, however, the Vorta had still not revealed. Their mission, so far, had been to secure the Federation outpost and protect the ship. Any indication why they were here in the first place had remained knowledge solely possessed by Wegnour. As far as Telaka'clan was concerned, it was an ineffective way to fight any kind of campaign. But those had been his orders and he would follow them until he was dead or physically unable to.

The slightly shorter Second took a small step closer to his superior. "With the deepest respect to the Founders," he said. "The Vorta is a weak fool. He worries more about his safety than the greater glory of the Dominion. He knows nothing of fighting a war. I have no doubt that without him we would have already been victorious."

Telaka'clan lowered the binoculars. He agreed with every word Arak'ikar had spoken. He slowly holstered the magnifying device and then suddenly and without warning whipped around, instantly finding the utterly unprepared soldier's neck. It took very little effort for him to snap it. It was quick and painless. Arak'ikar's body dropped lifeless onto the deck.

The First turned to his men who had watched the unexpected execution in silence. "The Vorta command the Jem'Hadar. The Jem'Hadar obey the Vorta without question. That is the will of the Founders. That is the order of things."

Any sign of shock dissipated from the hard faces of the assembled soldiers.

"Third Genu'tia."

One of the soldiers stepped forward.

"You are now Second. Take your men into the mine and wait for my instructions."

The newly promoted Jem'Hadar nodded without hesitation.

"Go and reclaim your lives in battle."

As his men left Telaka'clan alone on the observation terrace, the Jem'Hadar leader allowed himself a single glance at his former second-in-command. He had served with him for almost his entire lifetime. Five years of loyal service had ended not by giving his life for the glory of the Founders but because he had rightfully realized that their Vorta was incompetent. It was a dishonorable way to die for any Jem'Hadar.

Sickened by the sight, he abruptly turned and strode away, leaving the mess for somebody else to clean up. He had killed his most trusted and

possibly most skillful lieutenant but he knew that the real blame for his death was neither with him nor any other Jem'Hadar.

\* \* \*

Shelby Monroe and Xylion made haste through the darkened corridors of D level. The less time they spent out in the open, the less likely the chances of being discovered by a Jem'Hadar patrol. So far, the enemy had not been sighted on this level but nobody doubted that they would eventually move down from the command level above to take control of the entire complex. Time was against them.

"The only sensor access point on this level is in the north wing," Monroe told her companion quietly while she walked beside him with her phaser rifle held at the ready. "Heaven knows why they decided to place it as far away from the control room as possible."

"Sensory equipment requires significant space and is generally more sensitive than other systems," he said, not having noticed the sarcasm in Monroe's voice. "The location must have been chosen for those reasons."

"Do you believe your plan could work? If you manage to release the photons would you be able to neutralize the radiation enough to beam us out?" she said without slowing her pace.

"It will ultimately depend on the intensity of the radiation and the resources at our disposal. Theoretically, the plan is sound."

A sigh escaped the Monroe's lips. "There is a world of difference between theory and practice."

They arrived at their destination no five minutes later but just before they entered the doors to the sensor emitter room, Monroe froze. She turned to look down the corridor, slowly illuminating it with the rifle-mounted flashlight.

"Is there a problem?" Xylion said.

But Monroe kept her eyes fixated on the empty corridor. "Did you not hear that?"

"I heard nothing."

"And I thought Vulcans were supposed to have superior hearing."

"Commander, I suggest we hurry."

She nodded slowly and then, reluctantly turned away to carefully step into the room. Xylion shot a glance down the corridor, finding nothing, before following her inside.

To their disappointment, none of the handful of computer consoles in the room were operational. Xylion quickly tried to power one up manually but remained unsuccessful.

Monroe proceeded to the far corner of the room where a ladder led both upward and downward through tubular access shafts. She made sure both shafts were empty before she turned to Xylion. "This one leads directly to the sensor override controls," she said, pointing up.

He joined her. "Where does the lower shaft lead?"

"Engineering deck."

Xylion nodded as he looked up the narrow duct. There was not enough room for more than one person and all the relays he needed access to were right inside the shaft. "I will attempt to initiate the photon burst from here."

"Get started," she said sharply and headed for the doors again.

"Commander, where are you going?"

"I want to make sure we're alone."

"I strongly urge you to hold position within this room. We will pose an easier target if we separate now."

But Monroe shook her head. "I disagree. If something's out there I'd rather face it out in the open. You stay here and get those photons working," she said curtly and stepped back into the corridor.

There was no more point to protest, Xylion realized. Monroe was not listening to anyone but herself and her recklessness was beginning to cause him concern. For now, he understood that he had no choice but to do exactly what she had requested. He placed his phaser rifle against the wall since there was not enough room for him to take it into the shaft, and started to climb up the ladder.

\* \* \*

She hid it well but Owens knew that his plucky security chief was in a great amount of pain. He had managed to bandage the wounds covering her arms and legs but they hadn't had the time to allow for the bleeding to cease and her wounds had not stopped her from taking point for the trip back to the auxiliary command center.

The four officers had remained silent ever since they had departed from the now-destroyed and useless emergency transmitter. Each deep in their own thoughts now that any hope of swift reinforcements from *Eagle* had been squashed.

Owens was relieved to find that they had not encountered another Jem'Hadar patrol once they were approaching the command center again. He knew they were in no shape for another fight.

Then Nora stopped and indicated the presence of enemies ahead. The captain's mind instantly switched back to combat mode, pushing all previous doubts aside.

He understood most of her hand signals this time. She estimated two targets around the next corner and suggested to try and flank them. Owens gave her an acknowledging nod and gestured for Zalak and Tren to take the parallel corridor to approach their targets. He quickly regretted that decision when Jana and the Bolian slipped out of sight. But it was too late.

He tried to focus on the confrontation at hand instead and approached Nora. Together they snuck up the edge of the bend ahead. Owens took a deep breath and slowly counted to five to allow the others to get into position. He gestured for Nora to engage.

They shot around the corner, ready to blast their enemies. Only at the last second did he realize that their targets were wearing Starfleet uniforms.

"Friendlies," Nora said just in time to stop Zalak and Tren to open fire from their flanking position.

Germaine McAllister kept his rifle firmly pointed at Owens' chest even after the captain had lowered his.

Zalak carefully stepped behind the jittery young officer, placed his hand on the weapon, and pushed it down. "It's all right, Ensign. Relax."

McAllister took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, sir," he said to Owens. "You scared the hell out of us. We thought you were Jem'Hadar."

"Be thankful we weren't otherwise you'd be dead by now," Nora said, utterly unimpressed with the ensign, and then stepped right past him.

Captain Zalak seemed more forgiving of his officer. "Ensign, what are you doing out here?"

"Sentry duty, sir. Commander Monroe's orders."

"Where is she?" Zalak said.

"She left with Commander Xylion."

Owens was not pleased to hear that. "I gave her implicit instructions to stay close to the control center."

McAllister didn't have a response. Instead, he looked at his captain. "It is good to have you back, sir. What do you want us to do?"

"Return to the control room for now. You're just an easy target out here. Then we figure out what to do."

McAllister and his partner nodded and followed Owens and the others, filling them in on Monroe's plan on the way back.

"It sounds as if it could work," Tren said once they were back behind the relative safety of the blast doors protecting the auxiliary control room. "If they succeed, we might be able to contact your ship again and beam in reinforcements."

"That is if *Eagle* is still in range and available to help us," Owens said and took a chair, thankful to be able to rest for a few moments.

Nora remained standing as if to prove that even though injured, she was a long way from being beaten. "It was a foolish decision," she said. "They have no protection and could easily fall victim to another Jem'Hadar attack."

"That makes them as likely to succeed as any of us," Zalak said.

Nora looked as if she wanted to respond but Owens cut her off. The last thing he needed now was for one of his officers to engage in an argument with the station's commander. The chain of command was already ambiguous enough. With the return of Zalak he was also back in charge of his station and all Starfleet personnel on it but Owens had no intention of placing his crew under the authority of an inexperienced command officer.

"Lieutenant, there are several medical devices in these crates. Why don't you attend to your injuries?" Owens said but left little doubt that it hadn't been a question.

Nora got the hint and went on the hunt for instruments to treat her wounds.

Owens stood and faced Zalak and Tren. "There is something about all of this I do not understand."

They offered him quizzical expressions.

"If *Archangel* is supposed to be such a threat to the Dominion, why haven't they simply destroyed it from orbit?"

Zalak frowned at the Tren. "You told him about *Archangel*?"

"I showed him," she said with little remorse. "He deserved to know," she added, and then to Owens: "The lab is too far underground for orbital bombardment to be effective."

But Owens didn't buy it. "They still could have buried it by taking out Epsilon Twelve. Why this stealthy attack? Why the knock-out gas? Why the tip-toeing around? This doesn't strike me at all like the way the Jem'Hadar usually operate."

"Perhaps your knowledge of Dominion tactics is not as extensive as you think," Zalak said.

"Perhaps," Owens said without any conviction. His glance was focused on Tren, however. He could tell that she was suddenly very preoccupied with his line of inquiry. She didn't want to talk about this. "But I bet there is something you haven't told me yet. Something that might help to make sense of all of this."

Zalak stepped in between Owens and the Tren. "Quite frankly, Captain, you already know more than you should. I suggest we focus on a way of defeating the Jem'Hadar instead of wasting time on hypotheticals."

Nora had found medical supplies including a dermal regenerator that sewed up her wounds in a matter of seconds. When she notices Zalak's aggressive stance, however, she was quickly back on her feet to stand next to her captain. Owens couldn't stop her, it was simply her nature.

Owens stepped around Zalak to approach Tren. "What does the Dominion really want here, Jan?"

She looked right into his eyes. Whatever she knew, she didn't want to put it into words. She didn't have to.

"Why do they want *Archangel*?" Owens said after he had picked up her thoughts.

"Agent Tren," Zalak said loudly to discourage her from continuing.

"There is a chance," she said, ignoring the Bolian and keeping her eyes on Owens, "that *Archangel* can be turned against us."

"What does that mean?" Nora said. She had not seen the underground weapon and knew less about it than Owens. She had gathered by now that the weapon they were trying to protect was immensely important to the Federation's war effort.

"It means that it can be reprogrammed to target us. All of us," she said and finally turned away.

"Reprogrammed? What kind of weapon is this exactly?" Owens said, now turning to Zalak.

"It is quite possibly the most advanced piece of military hardware ever constructed. It creates powerful waves of electromagnetic energy that actively target the Jem'Hadar genome and break it down at a molecular level. Theoretically, it can produce an unlimited amount of radiation that will not only be able to traverse solid objects but even force fields and the vacuum of space. Once activated it could wipe out the entire Jem'Hadar race in all the known galaxy."

"My God," Owens said.

"You're saying this is a metagenic weapon? I thought those were outlawed by the Federation Council?" Nora said, doing a slightly better job at digesting the new information.

"My dear lieutenant," Zalak said. "Without this weapon, there won't be any Federation Council left."

"You don't know that," Owens said. "How can you justify something like this?"

Tren turned back around with a new fire burning in her eyes. "Desperate situations require desperate measures."

"Is that your justification for genocide?"

"Genocide?" she said as if she had misunderstood. "This isn't genocide. The Jem'Hadar are not a race. They are an artificial creation of the Dominion. An abomination designed for the sole purpose of bringing fear and death to the galaxy. We have the chance to rid the universe of them for once and for all, can't you see that?"

Owens had no words to offer. He no longer recognized Jana Tren.

"You said it could be reprogrammed to target us?" Nora said, trying to refocus the discussion. "Does that mean that if they get possession of this weapon, they could eradicate all Bajorans, all humans?"

She nodded slowly. "Eventually, yes. Maybe."

Dead silence followed as it took a few moments for these implications to fully sink in.

The reality of the situation was almost too much for any mind to comprehend. A battle to protect a weapon that could lead to Federation victory had just become a struggle that could very well determine the fate of the entire human race, the entire galaxy.

"We have to destroy it," Owens said quietly.

"Absolutely not." Captain Zalak said

"We don't have a choice," Nora said. "We're surrounded by Jem'Hadar without hopes of any reinforcements arriving soon. We cannot hold this position indefinitely."

"I'd rather activate *Archangel* right now than see it and any chance of us winning the war destroyed," Zalak said, not entirely able to mask his rising anger.

But Tren shook her head. "Activating it would not help us. According to Doctor Santesh-Yardo, he and his team are still weeks away from it becoming fully operational. We might very well end up destroying it if we tried to use it now," she said and stepped toward the second blast door that led to the underground lab. "But we do not have to destroy it," she added and turned back to the others. "The lab is completely sealed off from the surface. There is no way for the Jem'Hadar to get to it."

"Are you truly willing to take that chance?" Owens said. "You said yourself that a power surge might unseal those doors. We can't take that risk, too much is at stake."

She kept her eyes trained on him; utter determination written all over her face. "That's exactly why we cannot afford to lose *Archangel* now."

"This is insane," Nora said.

Owens was willing to take no for an answer. The situation was entirely unacceptable. Not too far beneath his feet rested a weapon that could destroy all life in the Federation and a few meters above them awaited a significant force of Jem'Hadar soldiers dead set on acquiring it and fulfilling *Archangel*'s apocalyptic purpose. The odds were decisively set against them. There was only one option here and it was not open to debate. "Jan," he said softly. "I cannot allow for the possibility of the Jem'Hadar to get their hands on this thing. It needs to be destroyed, now. Surely you can understand that."

Captain Zalak stepped next to Tren. He was holding a phaser rifle now and it was leveled right at Owens. The assembled crew members in the room if not already tuned in on the debate between the senior officers now all focused on the standoff unfolding right in front of them. Some reached for their weapons.

Nora instinctively drew her phaser, pointing it at Zalak.

Owens kept his eyes on Tren but found her expression as determined as the Bolian's next to her. She slowly reached for her sidearm. "I'm sorry, Michael."

Owens couldn't believe she would be able to shoot him and yet her phaser was now pointed at him as well. Jana Tren had become a complete stranger to him within just a few minutes. She was convinced of her actions and she was willing to defend her beliefs until the bitter end even if it

meant that she had to turn against him. "You're gambling with the lives of everyone in the Federation."

"I'm trying to save the Federation."

The room fell silent once more.

Finally, McAllister made the next move, standing up next to Zalak his phaser rifle pointed at the two officers from *Eagle*. Within seconds every weapon in the room followed suit.

Seemingly unconcerned Nora kept her weapon firmly trained on Zalak. If anyone was going to start firing, the Bolian, she was determined, was the first to fall.

Owens didn't bother to draw his phaser. He knew there was no point.

"We don't have the facilities to restrain you, Captain," Zalak said. "But I'm not willing for you to remain in close proximity to *Archangel* either. I have to ask you to leave."

"And go where exactly?" Nora said with disbelief that their fellow Starfleet officers were perfectly happy to sacrifice them to the enemy.

"I suggest you make your way to engineering," Tren said. "At the moment that place is as safe as any on this station."

"Sure, if we get there in one piece," Nora said.

"I regret it had to come to this," Zalak said. "I really do. But I cannot see an alternative. Our aims are simply no longer compatible."

Owens knew when a situation was hopeless and he had no intention of trying to challenge Zalak's decision. But he knew that he would do whatever was in his power to ensure the destruction of *Archangel*. But this was not the right time. He gestured for Nora to head for the main doors.

"Wait," Tren said. She reached for two phaser rifles and handed them to Owens. "Michael, please believe me, I wish there was another way."

He took the weapons without uttering a word.

"Please," she said quietly. "Be careful."

"You're making a mistake, Jana. You know that none of us might survive this but we can at least make sure that the rest of the galaxy does," he said, trying one last time to appeal to her senses.

She offered him a sad smile "I guess that's why it never worked out for us. We just could never agree on the little things."

He didn't feel like reciprocating her smile and walked out in silence.

After they had left and were carefully making their way to the nearest Jeffries tube access that would take them to the engineering deck Nora spoke up again. "I can't stop thinking that there must be another reason why the Jem'Hadar have adopted such unusual tactics?"

"What makes you say that?"

"From what I can tell, the Jem'Hadar surely must have the numbers to mount a frontal attack. It just doesn't make sense for them to stall for so long."

"Time is on their side," he said. "With *Eagle* preoccupied we don't pose much of a threat."

"Maybe. But eventually, Starfleet will come looking for us, won't they? The longer they wait to make their move the less likely their chances for success," she said thoughtfully as they reached the hatch to the Jeffries tube. "It feels as if something else is happening here that we're not seeing," she added as she removed the access hatch.

Owens agreed but had a difficult time concentrating on their enemy's plans. Instead, his mind was preoccupied with the fact that he had, quite possibly, just seen Jana Tren for the last time.

## XII – DOUBLE VISION

Formerly third – now second – Genu’tia did not know why he and his men had been ordered to guard the entrance to mine shaft 6B and he didn’t require any explanation. He had asked for none. Instead, he would do exactly what he had been told, nothing more and nothing less.

6B was nothing more than a large underground cavern that had once functioned as a central collection point for the ore that would have been delivered through several smaller tunnels branching off deeper into the earth. Of course, the Jem’Hadar soldier knew nothing of the history of the mine. All he knew for certain was that twelve men were not enough to defend the extensive cavern, filled with rusty equipment and spanning four levels.

He had stationed three of his men at each of the main access points, leaving him with three additional soldiers to keep an eye on things from a small raised platform at the center of the cavern. Sensory equipment would not help them in detecting enemies due to the high levels of radiation in the mine. They would have to rely instead on their sharp vision which was already somewhat compromised by the low light levels.

Communications were equally unreliable and they depended on routine oral reports from the teams protecting the perimeter. The second team was now one minute overdue for their report and this worried Second Genu’tia. Jem’Hadar were meticulously punctual creatures. Something was amiss.

He turned to his lieutenant. “Check on team two and report.”

The soldier nodded curtly and swiftly headed toward one of the entrances but not before shrouding himself, making him near-invisible to his enemies.

A quiet and dull noise startled Genu'tia. It had come from one of the other access points and he was unable to attribute it to anything he recognized. The Jem'Hadar's hearing was good, of course, but not quite as refined as that of the Vorta and the sound had been very subdued, just low enough to stir his curiosity.

He took a few steps in the direction from where he believed it had originated and soon realized that the men who had been placed there were no longer visible.

"Second."

Genu'tia whipped around at the sound of his lieutenant.

He had reappeared and had a near-panicked expression on his face, his weapon held at the ready. "We're under—"

A phaser blast cut him off. The sound of the beam had been suppressed to not much more than a gentle whoosh but the nearly instantaneous flash of light was evidence of the attackers. The man collapsed instantly.

"Starfleet," Genu'tia called out to his men. "Engage," he said and then engaged his own shroud and opened covering fire at what he thought was the direction of the attack, somewhere above them.

His two remaining men never got the chance. One was cut down immediately by another sniper blast, the second man was drilled within seconds by phaser fire coming from three separate directions.

The enemy was advancing from all sides. It was a splendid tactic, one worth of the Jem'Hadar but the Second didn't have time to contemplate the efficiency.

He noticed three two-man teams closing in on the center of the cavern. They knew he was there—the sole survivor—and they were looking for him.

Genu'tia remained shrouded and on the move, trying to find a way to elude his enemies, not to escape them, but to cause the most possible damage. He was no longer concerned with survival. His life was already over.

His shroud was good but not perfect. He managed to get behind one of the assault teams, realizing that they were not made up of the same type of Starfleet troops he had faced in combat before. The way they moved, with great purpose and without making much of a sound at all, it was clear to him that they were specialists.

It didn't matter. They were not superior to the Jem'Hadar. They couldn't be, since they had not been created by the Founders.

He carefully got a bead on his opponents.

"I can smell you, Jem'Hadar."

The booming voice came from behind him. He turned just in time to deflect a razor-sharp blade meant for his head.

The large Klingon seemed even more motivated now that he had found his prey.

Genu'tia's rifle fired but the shot went wide and before he could level the weapon again, the Klingon sword ripped it right out of his hands.

In a last desperate attempt, the Second unsheathed his small curved dagger and charged the warrior. "For the glory of the Founders."

The dagger was no match for the *bat'leth* that bore itself deep into the Jem'Hadar's flesh. Genu'tia's cloak failed and he became fully visible as his dead body sagged to the ground.

D'Karr roared with excitement over the sight of the slain enemy.

A few meters above, lying prone and close to the rock ledge, Leva and Wasco observed the scene below. A few moments later one of the Marines looked up to give the all-clear signal.

"Your men are impressive," Leva said as he stood, for the first time noticing the two snipers that had taken hidden positions within the cavern. "I wish I could say the same for the Klingon."

Wasco followed suit, offering him a puzzled expression. "He found and killed their leader."

Leva was not listening, instead, he quickly headed down the slope leading into the main pit of the cavern. He found D'Karr still standing proudly over the body of the Jem'Hadar soldier he had dispatched. A few of the Marines stood close, congratulating the Klingon.

"Which part of stealth assault did you not understand, Lieutenant?" Leva said as he approached.

It took D'Karr a moment to realize that he was being addressed. "The enemy has been defeated. We are victorious. That is all that matters."

"No," Leva said. "What matters is the mission and we cannot afford you shouting and screaming like a madman, running the risk of alerting every single Jem'Hadar between here and Cardassia Prime."

"Sir, our initial stealth attack was already compromised when the Jem'Hadar returned fire," said First Lieutenant J'ret, clearly somewhat perplexed by the extent of Leva's displeasure.

Leva ignored the other man. "The next time you will follow the orders you have been given. If you cannot do that you're nothing more than a liability to this mission and you might as well turn around now. Do I make myself clear?"

"You did not participate in the fight," D'Karr said, making no effort to remain diplomatic. "You cannot possibly judge what happened on the battlefield."

Leva considered him with an expression of disbelief. "You call yourself honorable and yet you have not the slightest understanding of how to respect a superior officer. Tell me, Lieutenant, are all Klingons this hypocritical or are you a special case?"

D'Karr bared his teeth and raised his sword. "You would do well in choosing your words more carefully," he said quietly but with all the menace of a man ready to kill for much less than the wrong word.

"Gentlemen," Wasco said as he approached the two men. "We still have a mission to accomplish. I suggest we focus on that."

Leva and D'Karr's venomous glares remained locked for a couple of moments more before Leva turned his back to the Klingon "It's like talking to a damned wall," he said and passed Wasco. "I told you, you'll regret bringing him."

Caesar Wasco shot a glance at his men who had become too invested in the conflict between the Starfleet officer and the Klingon warrior. He didn't have to say a single word for them to file back into formation and await the next order. He sighed inwardly wondering why not everything could be as simple and straightforward as it was in the Corps.

\* \* \*

*Eagle* was on the run again. Her impulse engines were running hotter than they had ever before as every last bit of power was being channeled into the ship's primary and secondary sub-light engines. The maneuver allowed *Eagle* to stay significantly ahead of its pursuers but it was a short-term solution at best. The impulse drive was not going to be able to keep up this kind of strain for long, and *Eagle* was in no shape to face the two Jem'Hadar attack vessels that appeared dead set on putting an end to this little space drama.

The Starfleet ship's destination was a large asteroid field at the outer edge of the Ligos system. The field was remarkable only because of the size of its component fragments. Most were just about as big as *Eagle* itself while the largest chunks of rock within the field rivaled the mass of small moons. It was all that remained of Ligos XII, a super-planet that had completely collapsed some ten thousand years earlier.

The bridge had remained uncharacteristically quiet since they had detected the presence of two more Jem'Hadar ships intent on destroying *Eagle*. Sensor readings had confirmed that their attackers were operating at high efficiency, and every computer simulation pitting them against the damaged Federation vessel had ended in the same devastating result.

"Lif," Wenera said quietly to the acting captain sitting next to her in the center chair. "Please tell me you've got a plan."

He nodded slowly and pointed at the asteroid field on the viewscreen. "We're going to hide in that."

She glanced at the screen and then back at him. "And then what?"

He looked into her eyes. "I haven't quite figured out that part yet."

Her expression revealed that it had not been the answer she had been hoping for.

"We're now entering the asteroid field," said Srena from the helm.

"Find us a nice, concealed place to park and prepare to power down all main systems. Keep life support on minimum and sensors on passive scan only," Culsten said and sat up slightly straighter in his seat.

The order was quickly acknowledged and *Eagle* dove deeper into the field of humongous space rocks. For a moment, Culsten envied Srena for the chance to pilot the ship through the dense field of rocks. Then he quickly remembered that he had much more important decisions to worry about. And he knew he had to make them soon. Hiding in the asteroid field would buy them some time. The Jem'Hadar may have been a single-track species, but they were certainly not stupid. And the one thing they did better than most everyone in the galaxy, was to find and kill their prey.

Locating a three-point-two million-ton starship inside an entirely natural debris field wouldn't take them long. He figured they had an hour. Maybe two if they got lucky. Whatever their next move was going to be, they needed to make it soon.

What that move was going to be, he had no idea.

He needed time to think.

Staring at Srena's back, he came to realize that he didn't envy her for the chance to prove her skills as a pilot navigating a starship through an asteroid field. He envied her for not having to sit in the command chair, a seat that had suddenly become a whole lot less comfortable.

\* \* \*

After their initial encounter with the Jem'Hadar, their continuous descent deeper into the mine had been eventless. Their progress was slow, however. Not only because of their need to remain undetected so as not to overtly encounter another enemy patrol but also because of the increasingly steep terrain. The mine had quite suddenly begun to drop drastically into the earth and the tunnels had become narrower and much more treacherous to navigate.

Leva tried to refer to the map displayed on his display device to get a better picture of where they were going but he soon realized that the tunnels they had entered were no longer represented on the outdated schematics they had brought. The only thing that seemed certain was the fact that their general direction corresponded with the location of Epsilon Twelve.

Both Leva and Wasco paused in the dark shaft when they spotted the return of the small scouting unit they had sent ahead.

His Caititan second-in-command replied. "This path seems to terminate about six hundred meters ahead. There are three narrow vertical shafts leading downward," said scout leader J'ret.

"Any sign of Jem'Hadar," Leva said.

The lieutenant shook his head. "None that we could detect, sir."

"Let's have a look," Wasco said.

A few moments later they reached the end of the shaft just where J'ret had said it would be. There wasn't much space and the twelve-man strong team quickly began to crowd the small cavern.

The only way to proceed was through the shafts that led sharply downward, each not much wider than a standard Jeffries tube. There was no light down there and their flashlights could not find the bottom.

"It appears we have two choices," Wasco said. "We either proceed down the shaft or we turn around and try to find another way."

D'Karr was the first to offer an opinion. "It makes no sense for us to turn back now," he said and peered into the darkness below. "Our destination awaits us down there."

"How would you know?" Leva said.

But D'Karr remained quiet as if he didn't see the point of engaging with the other man.

"I agree with Mister D'Karr," Wasco said and ventured a look down into the void. "We've already lost too much time. This seems to be the only direction that will lead us to the outpost."

Leva tried hard not to show his irritation when he stepped next to Wasco. "It will be difficult to climb down these walls."

"My men are trained for this kind of situation. But I understand if you are not, Commander."

D'Karr shot Leva an almost amused look, seemingly taking pleasure at the possibility of him being unable to proceed due to an inherent lack of skill.

Leva decided to the implication. "Don't worry about me, Major. I was merely pointing out that it might be difficult and time-consuming to get all your men thorough one of these shafts."

Wasco nodded curtly. "Agreed. We will split up into three fire teams. I'll take Alfa through the first shaft. Commander, I suggest you head up Bravo through the second."

Leva nodded in acknowledgment and didn't have to wait five seconds to find the members of his squad forming up on him.

Wasco turned to a slender, fire-red-haired Marine. "Master Sergeant, you'll lead Charlie team."

"Yes, sir," said Shinsky and tended to his men.

"What do you expect me to do?" D'Karr said.

Wasco pointed at Shinsky. "Charlie is one man short. You will lend support."

"Support?" D'Karr said with noticeable disbelief. "I'm a leader, Major, not a follower. Put me in charge."

Leva, overhearing the Klingon's defiant tone, turned to face D'Karr. "You will do as you are told, Lieutenant."

D'Karr barred his teeth and took a confrontational step toward Leva while Leva in turn placed a hand dangerously close to his holstered phaser.

But D'Karr backed off with sudden laughter. "You want me to follow?" he said to Wasco. "I'll follow. But if you wish for us to survive this battle, you'd better change your mind and soon," he said and then approached Shinsky. "Orders?"

"That sounded like a threat to me," said Leva.

Wasco shook his head. "He's Klingon. Which means he's not afraid to die in battle."

Leva turned away, appalled. "If he dies in battle, he better make sure it's fighting the enemy," he said quietly and then joined Bravo team to descend into the depths of the mine.

\* \* \*

DeMara Deen had surprised Edison when she had reached out for her phaser rifle and approached the now-sealed blast door into the engineering section without saying a word.

"Dee?"

She shot him a glance, putting her index finger against her lips as she continued to sneak up to the heavy door.

Intrigued, he quickly found his own weapon and followed her.

She moved up to the door until her head was just centimeters from the metallic surface.

"What is it?" he said once he realized that she was trying to hear something.

"I think it might be a code," she said in an equally hushed tone. "It's getting louder."

And then he heard it as well. It was too regular to be unintentional.

It was a soft banging sound, metal against metal, but he did not recognize the pattern. "Somebody's out there."

She nodded as she continued to pay close attention to the sound. "It's a mathematical sequence. Both digits and letters, I think."

It was no simple Morse code, that Edison would have recognized. "Can you tell what it says?"

Her facial expression mirrored her rapt concentration. "Nine-four-one-two-one. A-one-one-R," she said slowly and then looked at Edison. "It's repeating."

A flash of recognition crossed his features. "Open the door."

She gave him a puzzled look.

But Edison gave her a reaffirming nod and then pointed his rifle at the door, ready to obliterate whatever stood behind it in case he was mistaken.

She proceeded to the controls and activated the release mechanism that thankfully ran on auxiliary battery power while the main generators were down.

The blast door began to lift slowly, revealing a clearly humanoid form, wearing a Starfleet uniform. He stood alone and waited patiently until the gate had fully exposed him.

"Xylion?" Deen said in recognition, a sigh of relief coming over her lips.

Edison who had already expected to see the Vulcan nodded. "It's his service number."

On closer inspection, they both noticed that his uniform shirt was slightly torn and that he had scratches covering much of his skin. He was not armed.

Edison swiftly approached him. "Come in, Commander," he said and then double-checked that the corridor behind the Vulcan was empty. Once he was satisfied, he turned back to Deen. "Close it."

She complied immediately.

He lowered his rifle as he turned to the science officer who from the looks of things had only recently been in quite a scuffle. "Don't get me wrong, Commander, I'm glad to see you but what're you doing here? I thought you were supposed to stay in the auxiliary control room."

"I am afraid, sir, I have unfortunate news to report," Xylion said. He seemed a little out of breath, which Edison immediately took as a sign that whatever had happened to him was much worse than he had thought initially. "We were attacked by a changeling."

Deen gasped.

"I believe it is now posing as either myself or Commander Monroe. Returning to the control room was not an option."

Edison nodded slowly. He took the news calmly but his mind was racing with the possible implications of this new factor. "Who else knows about its presence on the station?"

"I cannot be certain," he said. "Commander Monroe and I were separated from the others when it attacked."

Deen took a seat. "If nobody knows about the changeling, it could take anyone's form and strike at any time. We have to warn the others."

"Easier said than done," said Edison. "Without communications, we cannot get the word out."

Xylion offered a small nod. "I advise against leaving this position. I managed to avoid two Jem'Hadar patrols on my way here and was forced to engage a third. It was only by coincidence that I was able to survive the encounter."

Deen shook her head and turned to look away from the two officers. "We're surrounded by Jem'Hadar soldiers, headed by a changeling who can take on the form of anything and anyone, we have no means of communication and no power," she looked back at Edison, her face reflecting uncharacteristic desperation. "How could this get any worse?"

He had no answer. The situation was grim. In addition to what Deen had correctly pointed out, he was also aware that he had no way of knowing if the captain had been successful with his plan to contact *Eagle* or if he was even still alive for that matter. He couldn't help but think about Nora. If Owens was dead, then so was she. Nora Laas would not allow for the captain to come to harm unless she was unable to prevent it. The possibility of losing Laas filled him with a near-debilitating sadness.

"I suggest we focus our efforts on restoring main power. We might be able to establish communications if we can restart the generators," said Xylion once he realized that Edison's thoughts were somewhere else.

Edison quickly nodded, silently chastising himself for losing focus. "That seems to be our best bet at the moment. Commander, go and see if you can assist Lieutenant Hopkins with the generators."

He acknowledged with a subtle head gesture and without saying another word left for the generator room.

"Good luck with that," said Deen.

Xylion briefly froze, shooting her an asking expression which she answered with a hint of a smile.

\* \* \*

Patience was not one of the Jem'Hadar's greatest strengths. They'd never complain or act without specific orders from the Vorta but their nature demanded that they were either preparing for combat or actively engaging an enemy. Everything else was simply a waste of their purpose.

Presently, First Teleka'clan and his men were doing neither. Instead, they were waiting. Waiting for something to happen, for an order to attack an unspecified target at an unspecified location. Considering their numbers, it was an important target indeed and their victory seemed guaranteed. But the delay was making him restless. He could smell his enemy, that's how close they were, but besides a couple of skirmishes, he had not been allowed to be unleashed. It made no sense to him.

"You are concerned."

The Jem'Hadar leader couldn't believe he had been so distracted that he had allowed the Vorta to approach him unnoticed. It was a near unforgivable mistake and attestation that this state was beginning to make him ineffectual.

"We have lost contact with at least two of our scouting units," he said.

The Vorta nodded slowly as if it wasn't a concern. "Communications are unreliable for a very good reason. The increased level of radiation ensures that our enemy remains isolated and confused. When we begin our strike, they will not be able to effectively counter it," he said like he would a child. "It is a nuisance we have to be willing to accept for now."

Teleka'clan didn't say it but he was not satisfied with the explanation at all. The communications black-out his men could deal with but some had still failed to report to him, which meant that something had gone wrong. The arrogant Vorta didn't want to hear anything about that. He was too concerned with his overall plan that he was adamant not to reveal it to him.

"I know that you yearn for battle," he said in an overly understanding manner. He clasped his hands behind his back and began to round Teleka'clan. "You Jem'Hadar are a curious people. You need battle like you need the ketracel-white drug in your system. You mustn't worry. You will get your share of slaughter soon enough."

The Vorta stood with his back to the Jem'Hadar First. He reached for his ear as if he could hear something that Teleka'clan could not. He whipped around. "Rally your man," he said with a wide smile on his face. "We will attack very shortly."

The soldier nodded and prepared to leave.

"First Teleka'clan."

He froze and faced the Vorta once more.

"You and a contingent of your men will remain behind. We have some other plans for you," he said, maintaining that irritating smile.

Teleka'clan twitched ever so slightly when he realized that the Vorta seemed to be toying with him on purpose. More so he even took pleasure from it. He had been denied the glory of battle since he had set foot on this planet. Now as they were about to attack, he was told once again to watch from afar.

And something else preoccupied him. For the first time, the Vorta had acknowledged that he was not the only individual making the decisions. He could only guess who else was giving orders.

"Obedience brings victory."

Wegnour nodded slowly, his eyes gleaming with joy. "Yes, yes it does it certainly."

Teleka'clan turned and left to instruct his men.

\* \* \*

We're being shadowed. One or more individuals. Two hundred meters.

Owens had quickly learned the sign language Nora used to communicate with him. He couldn't deny its practicability in a situation where their combadges refused to operate and the enemy could lay in wait behind every corner.

They had only just reached the engineering deck when Nora had indicated that they were not alone. Without exchanging more than a few words they had hatched a plan to lure them out in the open and confront them.

The most likely scenario was that it was the Jem'Hadar who were on their tails but somehow Owens doubted that they would have elected such a stealthy approach. He couldn't be certain. Nothing about this mission had turned out the way he had expected ever since they had first detected the Jem'Hadar following *Eagle*.

To trap whoever was behind them and have a realistic chance to dispose of them, Owens and Nora had decided to split up at a junction, with Nora attempting to turn back and attempt to pick up the enemy from behind.

Once Owens was alone, he started to develop second thoughts as he couldn't help but feel exposed, especially without the ever-vigilant Nora Laas at his side. Knowing that she was nearby, trying to get the drop on their pursuers, filled him with at least some sense of comfort.

He took his time. Not only because it was difficult to locate an appropriate place for an ambush in the dark corridor but he also had to

allow Nora to get into position. If he engaged without her covering him, he was as good as dead.

He stepped into a part of the station that was filled with containers and cargo crates. Plenty of opportunities for cover. He took a deep breath and then quickly slipped behind two large barrels. He took a knee and rested his phaser rifle on the top of the barrel, taking aim at the currently empty corridor, listening for footsteps.

For a long, agonizing minute, he neither heard nor saw a thing that hinted at the presence of the enemy.

Then he heard it. A phaser blast. Followed by another. A yelp of pain followed by a loud curse.

They were struggling and from the sound of it, Nora was not on the winning side.

Without another thought, Owens jumped out from behind his cover and hurried down the corridor. He carefully took the corner, always keeping his weapon ahead of him and ready to fire, and found Nora Laas pinned against the wall, held up by a person of impressive stature. She tried to free herself but her attacker was clearly much stronger than her.

Owens drew a bead on the man but froze when the light beam of his weapon-mounted flashlight fully revealed the attacker.

The man spotted the light and turned his head.

It was all Nora needed. Her boot found his vulnerable knee and he instantly stumbled backward, letting go of the Bajoran. Nora followed up with a high kick, targeting his solar plexus, and forcing him hard into the opposing wall.

Fast as lightning Nora drew her sidearm.

"Wait," Owens shouted and quickly approached.

Nora kept her weapon pointed at her opponent but held her fire.

Owens also kept his weapon on him but for a different reason. The bright light fully exposed the man's familiar uniform, his short black hair, and his distinctly pointed ears.

Nora finally recognized who she had tried to kill just a second earlier.  
"Commander?"

Xylion looked up. His face showed no sign of pain or irritation and when he spoke neither did his voice. "I apologize for the show of force on my part but you did not provide me with an opportunity to identify myself."

Nora holstered her weapon. "I could have killed you," she said, purposefully leaving out the part where the stronger Vulcan had caught her dead to rights if Owens hadn't interfered.

"Commander," Owens said, unable to hide his relief at finding a friendly face. "What happened? Last I heard you and Commander Monroe were working on a way to neutralize the radiation."

"I am afraid we were attacked and Lieutenant Commander Monroe and I were separated. We are facing an enemy we did not anticipate. It will significantly impact our chances of success."

## XIII – DUTY

*Eagle's* main shuttle bay was located on deck five and at the very end of the large saucer section. An expansive facility, it was easily the size of a football field. It was also usually kept empty in case the ship had to quickly launch or bring aboard a support vessel or any other large-sized object that would only fit into the bay.

Since *Eagle* had been in the midst of a cargo operation when it was attacked, the deck remained littered with containers and crates of all sizes that had been designated for Epsilon Twelve. There had been no time to secure the items when the attack had started and now much of their content was strewn across the bay. It ranked as one of *Eagle's* least important problems.

Wenera crossed the extensive bay without giving the chaos much thought. In her opinion, there was very little about their situation that was not already chaotic. She was looking for the one person whose job it was to restore some semblance of control.

He was not in the main shuttle bay, however, and more importantly, he was not on the bridge. After they had managed to find a place to hide, very close to one of the largest asteroid fragments in the belt, Lif Culsten had left Lieutenant Trinik in charge of the bridge while he had left to *contemplate their situation*.

That had been nearly half an hour ago.

Wenera who had stayed on the bridge had quickly gathered from Stanmore and Trinik that the Jem'Hadar were doing anything but patiently waiting for *Eagle* to reveal herself. Instead, they were meticulously combing through the asteroid belt, trying to locate and destroy their hidden prey.

According to Stanmore's estimate, they had twenty minutes, maybe less, until one of the two bug-shaped starships would stumble across them.

Wenera found an elevator platform and operated the control. It swiftly lowered her to the hanger deck below. With only the emergency lights in operation, she found the hanger an eerie place to be. Rivaling in size the shuttle bay above, it was packed with rows of parked shuttlecraft.

She was undeterred and slowly made her through the shuttle labyrinth, doing her best to ignore the loud echoes of her footfalls, until she found the only one with an open access hatch and an illuminated cabin. A medium-sized shuttle by the name of *Valkyrie*.

She entered and found the person she had been looking for, sitting in the pilot's seat, his feet propped up on the flight console.

"Permission to come aboard."

Culsten visibly jumped and whipped around. "Holy Mother of King Nartok," he said with exasperation. "Why must you sneak up on me like that?"

She shrugged apologetically and gave him a small smile. She said nothing as she sat next to him in the co-pilot's chair.

Culsten slowly relaxed. He gave her a sidelong glance but when he noticed that she was not looking at him he put his feet on the console and leaned back in his chair again.

For a good minute or so, they remained like that in silence.

"Doc?"

"Yes?"

"What do I do?"

She slowly turned to look at him. "You cannot stay here, that's for sure. There are people up there waiting for you to make a decision. They rely on you. Every person on this ship does."

"No pressure, huh?"

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "Listen, I'm not a counselor and I don't think we have time to get Trenira down here to speak to you about how you can be strong for your crew and—"

He shook his head. "It's not just about being strong," he cut her off and looked her in the eye. "I just don't know what to do anymore," he said pleadingly, hoping against hope that she would be able to tell him.

She considered that for a moment. "We could always leave, couldn't we? Make a run for it; hope that we can get to a starbase or another ship before they catch us."

"I've done the math," he said and shook his head. "In our current condition, we don't have enough power to stay ahead of the Jem'Hadar for more than an hour," he said, his glance dropping to the floor. "Besides we can't leave the captain and our people behind on that rock. We owe it to them to stay and try to help."

She agreed but she was also aware that they could not sacrifice everybody on *Eagle* to rescue the captain and the away team. "Then we stay and fight."

He uttered a laugh. It was short and devoid of amusement. "We wouldn't last ten minutes. I'm a pilot, not a tactician, doc. Why the hell did the captain leave me in charge?" he said, unable to keep the anger out of his voice. An anger he hadn't even realized he had been holding on to. But now he knew. He was mad. Mad at having the fate of hundreds of lives thrust onto his shoulders. Mad at the Jem'Hadar for insisting on destroying

the Federation and mad at the captain for putting him into an unwinnable position in the first place.

"Yes, go ahead, Lif," she said sharply. "Blame everybody else for what has happened Does it make you feel better?" she said, now no longer able to contain her own rising resentment. "It damn well better because it won't help with any of our other problems. You want to be mad at the captain? Go ahead, get it out of your system. Get mad at everyone. The Jem'Hadar, the Dominion, the crew, the whole damned universe. After all, this is all about you now."

He glanced at the raven-haired doctor with utter astonishment. He had never seen her upset before, hadn't even realized she had a temper at all.

She stood. "Stay here and wallow in self-pity if that's all you can do. But I refuse to surrender myself to this fate," she said and headed for the hatch. "I'll take command of the ship myself if I have to and we'll figure something out without you. Might as well take one of these tin cans and get out of here while you still can. If you're as good as a pilot as you keep saying, you might even make it."

As if struck by lightning, he swiveled around in his chair. "Doc?"

She threw him a look over her shoulder and found him smiling. It irritated her immensely. "What?"

"I think you just gave me an idea."

"Huh?"

He stood and approached her. "But I don't think you're going to like it very much."

She said nothing. Only now did she realize that she had truly lost her temper and suddenly felt quite ashamed of herself. She hadn't noticed it

before but the stress, the desperation, and the fear of sudden death had finally gotten to her.

He walked past her with a determined stride. He stopped when he had cleared the shuttle and realized that she was still inside. "Come on, doc. We don't have much time and I will need your help."

She shook off her paralysis and quickly followed.

"You know, you were right," he said once she had joined him.

"About what?"

"You're not a counselor. You'd be really bad at it, too," he said with a sly grin.

"Oh, shut up."

\* \* \*

Edison and Deen would have been surprised if they had been around to see it but Louise Hopkins had not offered even the slightest objection when Xylion had offered her his assistance restoring main power. In fact, quite the contrary was true. She had been very happy, almost eager for his help.

They worked hand-in-hand within the restricted hatch that allowed access to the main reactor's most vital parts. Space was so scarce that it was nearly impossible to avoid for them not to brush up against each other. Hopkins didn't seem to mind and Xylion, practical as usual, couldn't deny that their work method was producing results.

"Hyper-spanner, please," she said.

He located the tool and held it up for the chief engineer who was positioned slightly above him.

She took the device and quickly applied it to reinforce a magnetic seal.  
“This is the last one.”

“We should attempt to start the reactor.”

She shook her head. “Not yet. We need to reconfigure the influx compensators first. If they’re off-balance we might risk a power surge and everything we’ve done would’ve been in vain.”

“Very well, I suggest you rest for a few minutes while I try to access the compensators.”

She smiled at him. “Is that an order, Commander?”

“A suggestion,” he said, keeping his voice as neutral as usual. Hopkins was certain she could spot the faintest hint of a smile on his lips.

She gave him a nod and slid back down. To get out of the hatch she needed to pass Xylion very closely. She slowed slightly when she realized her body was pushing up against him. She flushed. “I’m sorry.”

Xylion gave her as much space as he could. It wasn’t much. “An apology is not required, Lieutenant.”

She managed to get by to get out of the small hatch. “I know Vulcans don’t like to be touched,” she said when she had made it all the way out. She sat down to the hatch so she could still see him work.

“That fact is irrelevant given our current situation.”

She nodded to herself, Xylion was not able to see her from where he was working. “Can I ask you a question?”

The Vulcan did not cease his efforts when he spoke. “Proceed.”

"Do you think we have any chance at all to get out of here alive?"

There was no immediate reply and Hopkins cursed herself for betraying her fears so openly to him. She wanted to be strong, especially in front of the Vulcan she felt attracted to. She knew the chances for the cold and emotionless man to ever feel the same way about her were slim but it had not deterred her from fantasizing.

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her. "I believe our chances are improving significantly now that we are close to reestablishing main power."

She couldn't be sure but she thought she could see a gleam in his eye. "In that case, I'd love to buy you a drink in the Nest once we're out of here," she said with a boldness that surprised her. It was a figure of speech, of course since there was no monetary exchange on *Eagle*.

Xylion turned back to focus on his work. "I will consider your offer."

A large smile crossed her features. She knew that he had been attempting to be a more involved officer by being more sociable with the crew but she hoped that there was more to his response than improving relationships with his fellow crewmates.

She decided that the reactor room had been getting awfully warm and lowered the zipper of her mustard-colored uniform shirt.

\* \* \*

Leva was not happy and he blamed D'Karr for this unexpected turn of events. It had taken him and fire team Bravo a good half an hour to get to the bottom of the vertical shaft and had swiftly realized that there was no

sign of the other two fire teams or for that matter of the other shafts. Their assumption that all three shafts would eventually lead to the same place had been wrong and now all teams appeared to be separated from each other.

They had entered another mining tunnel, which even though much wider than the last one was also nowhere near as straight. It was most likely an improvised extension to the mine, lacking the solid support beams that had dominated the rest of the underground network. Parts of this tunnel had already fallen in or looked as if they might do so soon.

Leva had wanted to turn back but First Lieutenant J'ret, the Caitian Marine, and his de facto second-in-command had gathered that the tunnel would still take them closer to Epsilon Twelve and so he had reluctantly agreed to press on.

They didn't get far, however. Leva knew that there was trouble as soon as J'ret had suddenly stopped and his nostrils began to flare. The cat-like humanoid possessed not only an increased ability to see in the dark—a skill immensely useful within the gloomy mine—he also had an incredible sense of smell. He looked at Leva and slowly nodded his head. He held up his hands, which to Leva looked more like paws. *Three maybe four*, he indicated.

Leva acknowledged and gestured to the rest of his men. Atiku Adenji and Jarine Ed'w'a were going to follow him, staying close to his side of the wall while Jamaal Booker would join J'ret at the far wall.

They turned off the flashlights on their rifles and proceeded down the tunnel relying mostly on feeling the rocks and walls.

It didn't remain dark for long. A light source ahead was the first sign of the Jem'Hadar guards protecting the t-section. Moments later they spotted at least three of them, none looking in their direction.

Leva gave the sign for the stealth attack he had learned from Major Wasco when he had ordered the same form of engagement in the large cavern earlier.

His men acknowledged, setting their assault rifles to quiet mode which sacrificed firing rate and power for phased energy blasts that were much harder to spot and barely louder than a whisper.

Leva had already singled out his first target. The Jem'Hadar soldier closest to them had his back turned toward him. He gestured for Adenji's razor-sharp knife, which he swiftly placed into his awaiting palm. Then he swung his rifle onto his back and silently approached the unaware soldier with the blade at the ready.

He was determined to demonstrate to D'Karr how to properly execute a stealth attack.

\* \* \*

"Engineering should be just ahead," said Nora who had taken point for the rest of their journey.

Owens was following closely while Xylon covered their rear.

They found the blast doors leading into the engineering compartment slightly raised. Too low to pass through but high enough to make their presence known. Once they had identified themselves, the gate began to rise.

"It's good to see you, sir," Edison said even as he maintained a surprisingly cautious distance to the new arrivals, phaser rifle in hand.

"Same here, Commander."

A large smile spread on Nora's face as quickly crossed the room to approach Edison. "Looks like you've been having it pretty easy down here."

"Are you all right?" he said with noticeable concern when spotting her torn uniform and signs of recent injuries.

"Flesh wounds," she said. She stopped short of giving him an embrace with everyone else watching, and instead just touched his shoulder. "Missed you," she added quietly.

Deen turned to Owens. "What happened? Did you manage to get in touch with *Eagle*?"

He sighed. "Yes, but they're under attack and it seems doubtful that they'll be able to send reinforcements anytime soon. And to make matters worse..."

Deen's eyes grew larger and she quickly stepped back from Owens, her gaze fixed on something behind him.

He wasn't sure what had brought on this reaction. He turned to see Xylion entering the room. "We picked up the Commander on the way here," he said. "And he has bad news."

"Commander," Deen said loudly, trying to get Edison's attention as she raised her rifle.

"What is this?" said Owens, still not clear as to what was happening. "Lower your weapon, Dee."

She shook her head. "Step away from him."

Upon spotting the Vulcan, Edison brought his weapon up as well, also pointing it at Xylion.

Nora, still standing next to Edison was as equally dumbfounded. "Gene?"

"Captain," Edison said, addressing Owens but keeping his eyes and weapon trained on the Vulcan. "When exactly did you run into Commander Xylion?"

Owens was beginning to lose his patience at the strange behavior of his people. "About fifteen minutes ago. What is this? Explain yourselves."

"It would appear," Deen said, "that we have a big problem on our hands. You see there already is—"

"Xylion?" Owens said when he spotted the impossible.

At the other end of the engineering compartment, Lieutenant Commander Xylion had just appeared. An expression of curiosity on his face. "Fascinating."

"Indeed," said the *other* Xylion.

Owens brought up his rifle and Nora followed suit within a second. Both weapons now pointed at the Vulcan they had not expected to find.

Deen looked over her shoulder and then back at Owens. "You see the dilemma?"

"One of them is a changeling," Edison said, keeping his weapon trained on the Xylion who stood by Owens.

Nora stood just beside him but her weapon remained on the possible imposter at the other end of the room. "Now what?"

Owens took two steps away from the Xylion who still stood beside him. His mind was racing, trying to figure out a way to allow them to tell which one was real and which one was only pretending to be. He tried to think of every word and gesture *his* Xylion had made since they had run into each

other, any inconsistency that would prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was not who he claimed he was.

"Logic dictates," said the Xylion who had come with the captain, "that we do not make hasty decisions."

"I concur," said the other Vulcan.

Owens scowled at them both. "I really rather think both of you need to be quiet right about now."

Both Xylion's complied.

The situation was the very definition of a stalemate. Edison and Deen had their weapons firmly pointed at the new Xylion they suspected to be the changeling while Owens and Nora thought the same about the one they had just discovered. Nobody was willing to lower their weapons for even a second while the two Xylions stood like statues, mindful that one wrong word or gesture could start a firefight.

"I say we shoot them both," Nora said, seeing a hint of humor in the situation.

Neither Xylion reacted to the statement.

"Maybe it's not a bad idea," said Deen and looked at Owens.

He shook his head. "None of our weapons are set to stun. And even if they were, we don't know if that setting will work on the changeling."

Just then the power came back. First were the lights which instantly removed any shadows and dark corners in the spacious compartment, giving everyone a perfectly clear view of the insanity of the situation before them. It failed, however, to illuminate any inconsistencies between the two men who each claimed to be genuine article.

Moments later the consoles and devices in the engineering room came back to life, filling it with the subtle background hum of a technical workplace.

"Hopkins," Deen said. "She restored power."

Edison drew another conclusion. "If our Xylion is the shapeshifter he would have killed Hopkins when he was alone with her."

Owens wanted to counter that they couldn't be certain that she was not in fact dead already when the chief engineer came through the door just behind the Xylion he was targeting. She had a beaming smile on her face for managing to restart the reactor which swiftly disappeared when she found the confusing scene.

"Lou, step away from Xylion, now," Nora said with such vehemence that made the other woman move instinctively.

It took her a few more seconds to understand that one of the Xylions in the room was their enemy. "Wait," she said. "He must be the real one. Why else would he have helped me restore power."

"Maybe to cast suspicions away from him," Nora said, unwilling to lower her weapon.

Edison shot her a sidelong glance. "He would've easily killed her and prevented her from reengaging power."

"Captain?" said Nora, clearly no longer sure of the right answer.

Owens was much in the same boat; he kept his aim true but took two more steps away from the Xylion to his left.

Hopkins stepped closer to Nora. "Laas, he's not the shapeshifter," she said but sounded as if she was trying to convince herself.

Nora knew as well as the others that they had reached an impasse and the longer it was allowed to continue, the greater the chance that the changeling would make a move or have a battalion of Jem'Hadar soldiers storm the engineering compartment which would be an easy target in their current state of confusion.

They had to make a move, and quickly. She allowed herself a second to take her eyes off Xylion and look at Edison. "Do you vouch for him?"

"Commander," Edison said, addressing the Xylion who had arrived with Owens. "A few days ago, we held a musical recital on *Eagle*. Which composition did you compliment me on?"

Nora understood. The shapeshifter could not possibly know the answer to the first officer's question. She slightly turned to be able to see Xylion's face when he responded.

The silence that followed added to the already razor-sharp tension in the room. Everyone present who was not a Vulcan—or pretended to be one—held their breath.

\* \* \*

As soon as Leva was in striking distance of his target his right hand darted out and clamped over the Jem'Hadar's mouth while pushing his head sharply back toward his chest. The Jem'Hadar struggled but was not quick enough to stop Leva from bringing up the combat knife to his now exposed throat.

That's when things went wrong.

The soldier at the far end of the junction turned at the most inopportune moment and spotted the assault before Leva had been able to follow through with the killing blow.

The Jem'Hadar wasted no time and seemingly unconcerned with his own man blocking the shot, he fired without delay.

The blast hit the Jem'Hadar, killing him instantly, and his lifeless body sagged to the ground, leaving Leva wide open.

Surgical and surprised shots from both J'ret and Jarine Ed'w'a dropped the Jem'Hadar before he had a chance to finish Leva.

By it was already too late. The element of surprise was ruined. Three more Jem'Hadar nearby unshrouded after they had heard the initial shot.

Leva didn't have enough time to grab his rifle swung over his shoulder and opened fire before the Jem'Hadar would engage.

Lucky for him, Adenji pushed him aside just in time to avoid the incoming volleys. The Marine floored one of the Jem'Hadar with a quick shot from his own rifle.

Everyone started firing.

The Marines found themselves at an immediate disadvantage as their weapons were still in silenced mode, which was not the desired setting when engaged in a firefight.

Leva found himself pushed into another tunnel with very little cover. He brought up his unmodified phaser rifle and opened fire at the first target of opportunity. This triggered immediate retaliation, as the Jem'Hadar unleashed a blanket of deadly energy.

Adenji who was closest to Leva tried to come to his help but was struck by rocks coming loose from above, triggered by all the heavy weapons fire.

The small cave-in allowed the other Marines to regroup and engage more efficiently and allowed Leva a short recess. He used it to reach out for the fallen Adenji and pulled him deeper into the tunnel and out of harm's way.

One of the Jem'Hadar noticed the easy target, took careful aim, and just as his finger was about to depress the trigger, he was struck by a phaser discharge. His weapon still fired even while he was pushed backward. The shot went wide and high, hitting the tunnel above Leva and Adenji.

It was all the unstable rock formation needed to come loose completely. A shower of debris rained down on Leva. He glanced up only to realize that he had mere heartbeats before he and Adenji were going to be crushed by debris.

Adenji's body was slowing him down considerably. He understood he didn't have a choice. He let go of Adenji and jumped only to see the Marine's body disappear not a moment later under multiple tons of rock.

Leva landed in the dirt nearby. The cave-in stopped and he pounded his fist into the ground with rage as if to punish the mine for the man's death, and his inability to prevent it.

"Commander?"

The voice was faint but he recognized the slight purr that was so distinctly Caitian. It came from the other side of the cave-in that had cut him off from the others.

He got back onto his feet and slowly approached the collapsed tunnel. "What's your status?"

"The Jem'Hadar are down," J'ret said, his voice sounding muffled through the rock.

"Do you have Corporal Adenji?"

There was no immediate response. Leva looked down at his feet and found a trail of thick red blood coming from underneath the rock and pooling around his boots.

"We have what's left of him."

Leva clenched his teeth in anger.

"Sir," he continued in a manner of detached professionalism. "There appears to be no way to get to you through these rocks. It would take hours to try and clear the way and we can't use weapons and risk another cave-in."

Leva didn't speak but he did agree with the other man's assessment. He was also preoccupied with regret that he had not insisted on returning when he'd had the chance.

"According to the map," J'ret said after a short pause, "you should be able to reach the outpost if you continue down the tunnel you are in. We will attempt to find another way."

Leva turned and began to search for his rifle. He could not find it. He had no weapon except for the knife that had belonged to Adenji.

"Sir?"

"Yes, yes," he said, frustrated while trying to locate a phaser or another weapon. There was nothing but rocks. "Very well, I'll proceed. You go ahead and find an alternative route," he added, deciding that there was

no point in letting them worry about the fact that he had no firearms to speak of.

He reached for a low-yield light beacon that was attached to the wall and without another thought began to make his way down the tunnel. He couldn't help but doubt that he stood much of a chance if he'd run into more opposition.

He knew that there was very little chance that he wouldn't.

\* \* \*

All eyes in Epsilon Twelve's engineering compartment were on Xylion. The problem of course was that there were two of them.

Edison had been the first with the presence of mind to ask a question only one of them should have known the answer to. Together with Hopkins, Deen, and Nora, he was staring daggers at the Xylion they all suspected to be the imposter. If he didn't manage to answer, or if his reply was incorrect, he was prepared to open fire.

When Xylion spoke, he did so as calmly as ever, never mind that his life might depend on his next words. "You played a pleasing rendition of the Vulcan Moon Serenade."

"Son of a bitch," Nora said as she realized that they had backed the wrong horse. But before she could whip around to find the now exposed changeling, the lights started to fluctuate. A screaming explosion erupted from the generator room nearby, causing the floor to tremble and every single console to blow out one after the other. This caught everyone by surprise.

Owens, who had never taken his rifle off the other Xylion, was the first to fire. The now wildly flickering lights caused the world around him to blink in and out at a frantic pace. The pretend Vulcan was there one moment and gone the next. The phaser blast hit nothing but empty air.

The room went completely dark.

Nora's eyes needed a moment to adjust to the unexpected darkness. But she could hear the fast-approaching footsteps. At least two individuals were on the move. Letting her senses guide her aim, she fired into the darkness. She heard the sound of something morphing and she was certain it was close. Very close.

The red glow of the emergency lighting finally dispersed the gloom. There was nothing in front of her but out of the corner of her eye, she saw a shiny, silver metallic blade extending her way. She tried to get out of its path but she already knew she would not be fast enough.

A sudden jolt hit her hard just before she heard the unmistakable sound of the blade cutting through fabric and flesh.

Whatever had impacted her had been so forceful, it had knocked her onto the floor. She was slightly dazed from the impact when she looked up and spotted Xylion hovering above her.

But it was not Xylion. His entire right arm had morphed into something akin to a lance of metal and steel and it was now firmly planted inside Edison's midsection. The changeling had targeted her but the first officer, apparently having seen the attack coming, had leaped toward her and pushed her aside just in time.

He had taken the full brunt of the attack instead.

Phaser fire shot across the room but missed the changeling by a few centimeters. He swiftly withdrew the blade with a sickening slashing sound and it formed back into a humanoid arm.

The Changeling spared Nora the briefest glance, a satisfying smile on his lips, before his body erupted like a volcano, shooting upward even while transforming into a semi-liquid state. Within a heartbeat, his entire mass had sucked itself through an air vent in the ceiling.

Nora found her rifle on the floor next to her and joined the others in opening fire but failing to hit anything alive. The Changeling was gone.

Nora felt another liquid collecting around her body. It was blood and it wasn't hers. She dropped her weapon and turned to Edison still lying next to her, unmoving.

Blood was pouring out of his chest and his eyes were only half-open, threatening to shut close any second. "Gene!" She bend over him, her hands racing for the gashing wound on his chest, trying to apply pressure.

She was fighting a losing battle. There was too much blood and the wound was too large for her efforts to show any effect. "Stay with me, Gene," she shouted, making it sound like an order.

Owens saw that Edison was injured and promptly gestured to Deen. "Medkit."

She was a step ahead of him, already having located one and ripping it off the wall.

Owens turned to his chief engineer. "What just happened?"

Hopkins' eyes were focused on Edison, her mind clearly still trying to cope with the fact that it had been Xylion who had done this. Or at least the man she had thought was Xylion.

Owens didn't have time for that. He placed himself into her line of sight. "Lieutenant," he said more forcefully.

"Power surge," she said slowly.

"How?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice sounding tiny. "Everything seemed fine just a moment ago. Xylion must have ... I mean the Changeling..."

Owens nodded to her and turned to the Xylion he now knew for certain was real. "Commander, why do you think the Changeling would want to create a power surge?"

"It is possible that a significant power surge could unseal the entrance to the underground lab," he said with his usually calm demeanor as though nothing out of the ordinary had transpired.

"I agree," said Owens and stepped up to where Nora and Deen were desperately trying to save Edison's life. He noticed his first officer was still conscious but he was fighting for every second. He locked eyes with him.

Edison nodded slowly, knowing exactly what Owens had to do. He mouthed a single word. 'Go.'

The next words out of Owens' mouth felt like utter torture. He placed a hand on Nora's shoulder. "We have to get to the auxiliary control room."

But it was Deen who looked up with disbelief. "What about Gene? We can't just leave him here."

Nora's hands were covered in Edison's blood when she withdrew them from his still-pouring wound. She looked at him with tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said in a whisper. "I'm so sorry."

But his eyes were devoid of accusation. He didn't manage to speak but he slowly moved his head, keeping eye contact with her as if to say that everything would be all right.

They both knew it wouldn't.

Nora reached for her weapon, not caring about smearing it red in the process, and stood.

"Michael," Deen said as she tried to close Edison's wound with the meager means at her disposal. "We can't leave him like this," she pleaded, not realizing that the life had already drained out of Edison's eyes.

"We have to..." She stopped herself when she finally realized the truth. She sagged back onto her heels, looking defeated and despaired.

Hopkins turned away from the ghastly scene, quickly wiping away the tears.

Owens spoke quietly. "We need to move out."

Deen was still on her knees next to Edison's body. "We can't just leave him here like this," she repeated but this time it meant something different altogether.

Nora gripped her rifle so hard that her knuckles turned white. "He's dead," she said, her voice cold as ice. "Let's go."

Exactly thirty seconds later, *Eagle*'s away team had left the engineering compartment, leaving their first officer behind—his head covered with nothing more than Deen's uniform jacket—his body spread out on the cold floor, lying in a puddle of his blood with nobody to grieve for him but the dead and unconscious bodies around him.

## XIV – COLLISION COURSE

Culsten had remained right. She hadn't liked his plan one bit. In fact, she thought it was utterly insane and yet she had begrudgingly agreed to it. More out of desperation rather than acceptance. She understood what was at stake. Not only their survival but quite possibly also that of the captain and the other senior officers stranded on Epsilon Twelve.

Wenera sat in the one place she would have never imagined herself. The center seat of the bridge. She was in charge now; everybody was going to look to her for leadership. She was scared senseless.

"Don't worry," Lif Culsten had told her. "They'll know what to do. You'll just be the figurehead."

She didn't feel like a figurehead when she caught a glimpse of Lance Stanmore's doubt-filled eyes. And why shouldn't they have been? A starship captain's chair during battle was not a doctor's place. Certainly, she knew of a few physicians who had made that leap but she had never felt the need to take on the heavy burden of command. She had never complained about her role as a subordinate, laboring in sickbay to keep the crew healthy enough to do their job.

"We're about to emerge from the asteroid field," Stanmore said and to his credit kept the tone perfectly professional.

"Any sign of the Jem'Hadar ships?" she said, surprising herself by the question. The truth was she desperately wanted some affirmation that they were far away. Hopefully at the other end of the asteroid field. Maybe that way they could avoid having to fight their –

"Both vessels have detected us and are now on an intercept course. They will enter weapons range in three minutes," Trinik said calmly,

crushing any hope the doctor might have had to come out of this one pain-free.

"Set a course out of the system at full speed," Wenera said not certain if she had phrased that correctly. It didn't matter, the message was quite clear. Run as fast as you can.

The helm officer acknowledged and *Eagle* shot away from the asteroid field it had been using as a hiding place and crossed into open space where she would make an easy target for the fast-approaching enemy.

"Can you put the Jem'Hadar ships on the viewer?"

Stanmore nodded. "On screen now."

The image quickly shifted to show the two pursuing vessels. They were forming up to go after the running Starfleet ship.

"At current speeds, I project that the Jem'Hadar will be in weapons range within two minutes and twenty-four seconds," Trainik said without being prompted.

Wenera cranked her head back to try to look at the man hovering behind her. She quickly gave up on the attempt. "Can we go any faster?"

Stanmore answered her question. "Not if we want to maintain maximum power to shields."

And Wenera knew that they had to. The shields were the only thing that kept *Eagle* from being blasted to pieces. They would need them.

The next two minutes were spent in silence. There were no more orders to give and nothing to do but wait for the inevitable. Wenera ran through the plan Culsten had hatched a few minutes earlier again and again. It was a terrible gamble that much she knew for certain but she also

understood that gambles were all they had left. She was also determined to kill the Krellonian should they survive this insane nightmare that refused to come to an end, Hippocratic Oath be damned.

"The Jem'Hadar ships will be entering weapons range in ten seconds."

She gripped the armrests of her chair tightly as she knew what was going to happen next. And then she saw it.

Three bright flares had appeared near the asteroid field and like missiles were shooting toward the Jem'Hadar ships. She knew that *Eagle* was not going to get away without adding another scratch to her battered hull but if Culsten was right they just might get out of this alive yet.

"The Jem'Hadar are opening fire," Trinik said with a sense of heightened urgency.

Wenera braced herself.

The modified type-9 shuttle handled like a dream. It had been outfitted with extra phaser arrays and micro-torpedo launchers as well as a tough-as-nails reinforced hull plating that had been painted in bright red and yellow colors to appear more menacing. Christened Raptor-One, the small combat vessel was also equipped with a sub-light afterburner, allowing it to accelerate to incredible, near-light-speeds for short periods of time.

Lif Culsten was pushed back into his seat as his shuttle shot like a bat out of hell toward the unsuspecting Jem'Hadar. Raptor-Two and Three were following in a tight echelon formation.

"Get ready to engage on my mark," Culstne said, knowing that he was linked to the cockpits of the two trailing shuttles.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Raptor-Two moving dangerously close to him. "Srena, check your heading. You're getting a bit too familiar."

But her shuttle didn't slow down and at their break-neck speed, a collision would most certainly mean certain death for both pilots.

He tried to compensate his heading slightly when he realized what she was up to. Her shuttle flipped sideways and then in a quick, swift motion began to roll over his ship keeping a distance of less than a couple of meters. He could see the blue-skinned Andorian ensign shooting him a large smile through her viewport. She executed the maneuver flawlessly and stabilized at his opposite wing.

He sighed with annoyance. "This is hardly the time to show off," he said. "Or are you trying to earn your Nova call sign?"

"You picked me because I'm the best pilot on the ship," she said over the comm. "I just thought I'd remind you of that."

The third Raptor took up the position Srena had vacated. "Just keep her well away from me," said Ensign Dahomey, "She's borderline insane in a shuttle. Think she may be compensating for something."

Srena laughed. "Wes, is that jealousy I detect in your voice? Don't worry, you'll get there someday."

The disturbing sight of *Eagle* beginning to take fire from the Jem'Hadar vessel reminded Culsten that they were not here to play around. "Let's focus now. We have a job to do. Stay on me; we take them out one by one."

The silver-haired Krellonian adjusted his heading for an ideal attack vector and his wingmen followed suit. He disengaged the afterburner and unleashed a volley of phaser bursts and micro-torpedoes.

The Jem'Hadar had been so focused on their seemingly easy prey that they had not paid much attention to what lingered behind them. There hadn't been any reason to as they had not detected any other starships in the system. That mistake was going to cost them dearly.

A hailstorm of deadly weapons fire slammed onto one of the bug-shaped ships. It took immediate evasive action but by that time it was already too late. Both vessels scrambled in different directions, trying to reassess the situation before striking back.

Culsten was determined not to give them time to do that. The tiny, speed-boat-shaped vessels could turn on a dime and all three Raptors made full advantage of their superior maneuverability once they had passed and unloaded on their primary target. Within moments they had the now damaged Jem'Hadar ship back in their crosshairs.

Their phasers were still recycling but that didn't stop them from unleashing another dozen micro-torpedoes. Not all of the tiny projectiles found their target but just enough to almost completely drain their enemy's shields.

Culsten's sensors warned him that the second Jem'Hadar ship had gained some distance and had turned for an attack run of its own.

"Go loose," he said quickly and then watched as his wingmen disengaged to avoid presenting a single target.

The Jem'Hadar fired a few shots, none of which found a solid target to connect with. The final blast graced Raptor-Three's shields, bumping the small fighter craft off course.

*"Bastard!"* Wes Dahomey cried.

Culsten shot a worried look at Dahomey's craft. He seemed to be able to stabilize his vessel quickly enough. "What's your status?"

*"The pebble-face nearly knocked my shields out,"* he said, his voice now showing signs of increased stress. *"I'll show him not to mess with me,"* he added and then blasted after the Jem'Hadar ship.

Culsten shook his head. He liked Dahomey and he was a skilled pilot but he could also be a hot-head, probably the only reason why he had yet made lieutenant. "Let's focus on the damaged one first."

Raptor-Three had quickly caught up with the gray and purple vessel and Dahomey wasted no time unloading his arsenal at point-blank range. Whatever message he had meant to send had certainly been received.

The distraction caused by the ensign's unsanctioned attack had allowed the other Jem'Hadar ship to swing back around and concentrate fire on Raptor-Two.

Culsten saw Srena dodge the incoming barrage by pushing her craft to its limits. *"Little help here?"*

"Three form up on me. Let's finish this one off," he said and brought his ship down on the damaged Jem'Hadar vessel. His sensors confirmed that it had just minimal shields remaining. A few more well-placed shots would take her out of commission for good.

He fired his phasers and seconds later was joined by Dahomey's torpedoes once he had rejoined him by his wing.

The Jem'Hadar ship's shields began fluctuating and both Culsten and Raptor-Three moved in closer for the kill.

It was only then that Culstne noticed that something was amiss. The Jem'Hadar vessel had stopped firing at Srena's shuttle even though she was still in range and the attack ship was more than able to deliver a deadly strike.

"*About time you got here,*" said Srena who seemed to be out of trouble for now. She steered her shuttle into a tight turn to help her comrades finish off their target.

"*We've got him now,*" Dahomey said with noticeable battle rage as he bore down closer on the limping ship. "*He's a goner.*"

Even though the others couldn't see it, Culsten began to slowly shake his head again. "Something isn't right here, I think we should—"

"Woah!"

It took Culsten less than a second to realize what had caused Srena's surprise. His sensor warnings were going crazy, showing an immense power build-up in progress and it was originating in front of their very eyes. He instantly knew that only one thing could be the cause of what was happening.

"Break, break, *break!*" he shouted and followed his own advice.

Not a moment later a blinding white flash consumed the entirety of his viewport and a massive shockwave threw him out of his seat.

The Jem'Hadar vessel had detonated its warp core.

\* \* \*

They had only narrowly avoided a half dozen strong Jem'Hadar patrol by slipping into a cramped maintenance chamber where they remained quietly, hoping that the patrol would pass without noticing their presence and allowing them to continue their urgent journey back to the auxiliary command room.

After what had just transpired, nobody felt like fighting, not even the always-primed Nora Laas. Instead, they now sat together in silence, not looking at each other but each one taking the short little time that had been afforded to them to process what had happened. It had been the first chance they'd had to mourn.

The tragic loss of the first officer had also quite suddenly brought about the revelation that neither one of them might ever get off Ligos IV alive. The crew of the starship *Eagle* had found itself in difficult situations plenty of times before but for perhaps the first time it had become unmistakably clear that survival was not guaranteed and that anyone could easily share Edison's fate at any given moment. And even if they survived the nightmare that they were living now, ultimately they would have to face the reality that one of their own, one of their most admired and respected colleagues – their friend – would no longer be among them.

Nora was as hard-faced as usual when she knew she was going to have to confront an enemy soon. It was nearly impossible to conclude from her body language or the few words she had said since leaving engineering that she had just lost the only man she had ever truly loved.

Hopkins and Deen were visibly shaken by the tragic events but understood that their duty at this moment was to follow their captain and to do what was necessary to survive. Tears and despair had to wait for a later and more opportune time.

Xylion whose very likeness had been the killer of the former first officer had said very little. He had led the team to a maintenance shaft that

provided direct access to D level where the auxiliary control room was located but had spoken even fewer words than usual and while he maintained his emotionally distant demeanor, his eyes were without doubt mirroring the regret he felt deep within.

The patrol passed and Owens and his officers left their hiding place to quickly proceed to their destination, much closer now thanks to Xylion's shortcut.

Owens was relieved to find that they were ahead of any Jem'Hadar plans to take the room by force. He was under no illusion that he and his people would not be welcomed with open arms by Epsilon Twelve's crew who had banished him not an hour earlier. But with little choice, he challenged the sentries that were guarding the control center when they started to protest his return. They were not bold enough to take on the determined captain and his equally resolute away team and keep them from the main entrance.

Owens immediately noticed what he had feared since the power surge earlier had come to pass. The blast door leading to the underground lab now stood unsealed, a few crewmembers trying unsuccessfully to make it impenetrable again.

There were at least two dozen members of the station's personnel in the room and probably half a dozen standing guard outside. He couldn't find the blue-skinned captain of the base or his first officer but Jana Tren had turned to him the moment he had stepped inside. There was surprise in her eyes when she saw him and he thought he could see a sense of relief as well.

Perhaps an hour ago, he would have taken comfort in her reaction, but the world had been a very different place for him back then.

"Michael, what happened?"

She felt the dread and frustration before anyone could answer. She knew instantly that something bad had happened and the absence of the only missing member of *Eagle*'s crew made the answer to her question all but obvious.

Owens was not in the mood to speak about dead friends. He pointed at the blast door. "We have a big problem."

She nodded. "I know. How could this happen?"

"There is a changeling on this station," Nora said sharply. "That's how that happened."

"What?"

"It's true. And something tells me it's been here for a while. You've been infiltrated, Jana."

She didn't speak, her mind clearly racing to come to grips with the implications of what she had learned.

Nora was much faster to spring into action. She took a step toward the raven-haired woman. "Where's Monroe?" she said and raised her phaser rifle, her intentions plainly obvious.

Tren looked at her with disbelief. "You don't think the commander is a changeling?"

Nora surveyed the room as she spoke. "Xylion was attacked by Monroe. This ... this thing has obviously been passing itself off as her."

"At this point that is only a theory," Xylion said. "It is true that the shapeshifter took on Lieutenant Commander Monroe's form when it attacked me but we cannot be certain that it will continue to use that shape. In fact, it would seem unlikely to do so now that we know of its existence."

"Do you think Monroe is dead?" Tren said. "I only just saw her a few minutes ago."

Nora instantly whipped around. "Where?"

"She said she was going to check on the sentries," she said. "She also claimed that she was attacked by Jem'Hadar forces when she left with Commander Xylion earlier. She was left for dead and managed to return here."

Nora uttered a sarcastic laugh. "What a great story," she said and turned to the exit. "If that slime creature thinks it can trick us that easily it has another thing coming."

Owens stopped her before she could walk away. For but a second, an angry look flashed across her face at being held back.

"We do not have time to start hunting after that changeling, Lieutenant," he said.

"What do you suggest?" she shot back, forgetting for a moment who she was speaking to. "That we just let that thing roam around undisturbed? Any of us could be its next target."

"It is possible," began Xylion, "that the shapeshifter has retreated to its base of operations to rally the Dominion troops and prepare an attack on this location."

Owens locked eyes with Tren. He could see that she knew that Xylion was most likely correct. But he could see something else in her eyes as well. The same determination he had noticed there earlier when she had held a gun to his head, refusing to give in to his demand. No matter how bad the situation, she was still not going to consider the only course of action that made sense to him. Owens looked back at Nora. "For now, all we can do is to make sure nobody is kept alone. We are safest from the shapeshifter if

"we remain in groups," he said and then looked back at Tren. "We need to fortify this place, now. Give everybody a weapon and prepare to hold off a Dominion attack. Where's Zalak?"

"Last time I saw him he was scouting the perimeter," she said. "But Michael, most of these people are scientists and researchers, not soldiers. They can't fight off Jem'Hadar."

Owens flared with anger. "Right now, we're all soldiers, Jan. They just have to hold them off or you need to blow this goddamned thing up right now."

The outburst caused most of the people in the room to turn to look at him. Even Deen and Hopkins showed their surprise. Owens was not a man who easily lost his temper.

Tren had shrunk away as well at the unexpected anger but quickly countered with ironclad determination. "I'm not about to give up the best chance we have to win this war. We'll fight to the last man if we have to."

The two simply stared at each other without adding another word to their seemingly impassable difference in opinion. None would back down from what they knew was the only right thing to do.

Deen took a step forward but stopped short of actually getting in between the two. "If we cannot fight them off up here, is there any chance we could evacuate to the underground section?" she said. "Could that not provide us with a better chance of survival?"

Tren turned away from Owens' defiant gaze only very reluctantly. "It is not impossible but we would be trapped under hundreds of meters of solid rock."

"So either we get massacred up here or we die of starvation down there?" Deen said with a small smile. "Neither prospect sounds attractive to me but I'd rather go with the one that buys us more time."

"For what it's worth, I agree," said Hopkins.

"I don't think it's a good idea," said Tren, shaking her head and turning away from *Eagle*'s officers.

"It's a good enough compromise for me," said Owens and took a step to follow her. "Jan, we're running out of time. The Jem'Hadar might strike any minute. Any plan is better than none at all."

Tren nodded slowly and turned around. Her eyes revealed her lack of conviction. She uttered a heavy sigh. "I don't like it but it might be the best option of all the bad ones we've got. From a logistical standpoint, there are a few considerations. That lift can carry no more than five, maybe six at any one time. It needs at least three minutes for a round trip."

Owens turned to his crew. "Let's get these people out of here."

\* \* \*

Wenera stood at the center of the bridge, unable to take her eyes off the horrific image on the screen.

"Life signs?" she said in a tone of voice barely louder than a whisper. She was scared of the answer.

Moments earlier she and the rest of the bridge crew had witnessed a massive explosion that had turned the Jem'Hadar attack ship into a bright fireball, swallowing up the darkness surrounding it, including the three Starfleet shuttles. Now all that remained was a field of debris.

"I'm detecting various life signs but they are too weak to identify from this distance," Stanmore said as his fingers danced over his console.

"We have to return and help them."

"Jem'Hadar attack ship bearing one-seven-five mark two-one-five, ten-thousand meters and closing."

She didn't even have the time to return to the safety of her chair before the ship was gripped by the immense force of the Jem'Hadar's weapons. Without doubt, the enemy had targeted the bridge of the Starfleet vessel as all around her consoles erupted, showering the bridge with hot sparks.

She was thrown to the floor as was Stanmore who landed just a couple of meters away from her. Ignoring the pain shooting up her limbs, she hastily got back onto her knees to help the young operations officer. She afforded herself a glance at the viewscreen where she spotted the purple-colored attack ship. It was beginning to turn around to come back for another pass. Still on her knees, she threw a glance at Trinik. She didn't know what order to give but the look in her eyes left no doubt that she hoped—prayed, that he knew what to do.

He understood. "Helm, new course, heading two-seven-one mark one-three one. Firing phasers."

Wenera didn't have time to sigh in relief. Instead, she tended to Lance Stanmore who was slowly coming back around. He was bleeding from his shoulder where a small duranium fragment had sliced into his flesh.

"I need to get you to sickbay."

He shook his head as he tried to get up. "I'm needed at my post."

She was about to protest when the ship was hit yet again. Not as bad as before but she was forced to steady herself against the floor to keep her balance.

"Aft shields at thirty-five percent," Trinik said.

"Doctor," Stanmore continued, "you cannot afford to lose me now."

She ventured another glance at the viewer that now revealed the enemy racing after them once more. It had become a familiar sight. She was torn. Her medical training, as well as the humanitarian in her, told her that Stanmore needed urgent medical care but his replacement was nowhere in sight and their chances without a trained officer at ops were certainly scantier than they were already.

She didn't have time for these kinds of deliberations and she knew it. She locked eyes with him. "This is going to hurt."

He nodded as he clenched his teeth.

Without much preamble, her fingers dove into his blood-soaked wound, found the small fragment, and pulled it free. She flinched noticeably when Stanmore cried out in pain. She threw away the fragment and then quickly retrieved an emergency medkit to clean and bandage the wound. It was a rush job, she knew, and not nearly enough to properly treat the wound. Against her better judgment, she decided that it had to be enough.

She helped him back onto his feet and to his seat. "Bridge to sickbay, we need a medic up here on the double," she said as she assisted him settling back into the chair.

He looked up at her. "Thank you, Doctor."

She flashed him a small, tired smile and turned back to captain's chair. She was certain her people down in sickbay had their hands full, especially

without her being able to provide help and guidance. They were going to do the best they could but it would take a while for a medic to reach the bridge.

As difficult as it was, she managed to push those thoughts out of her head. She sat down in the command seat with purpose. The Jem'Hadar ship on the screen had grown significantly closer since the last time she had looked at it.

"Mister Trinik, please direct all our weapons on the target and fire."

"Firing."

On the screen, phasers and torpedoes were catapulted toward the approaching enemy. The Jem'Hadar took hard evasive actions, avoiding the full brunt of the incoming fire.

"Multiple hits," Trinik said. "Their shields are at eighty-four percent and holding."

It was not the response Wenera had hoped for. "Out of curiosity, are you able to calculate our chances of escaping the Jem'Hadar, Lieutenant?"

"I already have."

"I'm sure I don't want to know but tell me anyway."

"Our current chances for escape stand at two-hundred ninety-six to one."

She swallowed hard. As much as she tried, she could not think of another order to give.

\* \* \*

It was a relentless, burning pain just behind his forehead that roused Lif Culsten from unconsciousness.

He immediately took that as a good sign. He was not dead. Not yet.

When he opened his eyes, he realized he was lying on his back, staring at the roof of the shuttle above. He tried to move and quickly regretted the attempt. His entire body felt bruised twice over.

Since joining Starfleet he had often been told that as a Krellonian he possessed faster reflexes and denser and stronger bones than humans and many other races. As far as his bones were concerned, he was sure he had managed to disprove that theory several times.

“Lif, you there?”

He turned his head but found that he was alone in the shuttle. It took his brain a few seconds to comprehend that Srena’s voice had come from the speakers. And then five more until he remembered where he was and what had happened.

He managed to move enough to get a look at the instrument panels. They appeared to be dark and non-operational.

“Please, say something.”

His gaze wandered toward the viewport. The shuttle seemed to be surrounded by debris but more prominently than all the dead rubble he could see a red and yellow ship. Raptor-Two.

He began to crawl toward the pilot’s seat even while his limbs continued to fight in protest. He pulled himself up and into the chair. “Srena, are you all right?”

"Thank Uzaveh, you're still there," she said with noticeable relief in her voice. "I'm mostly fine. My leg may be broken."

"What about Wes?" he said as he began to survey the debris for the third shuttle.

There was no reply.

He didn't need one. He found hull fragments of what had been an assault shuttle. Too many for there to be any hope of a survivor. It was the first death that had occurred under his command. He had led them in the attack and ultimately nobody else bore responsibility for Wes Dahomey's demise but him. It was not a concept that was easy to come to terms with.

"Lif, what's your status? I think Eagle is in real trouble."

Only then did he remember why they had been out there in the first place. To give *Eagle* a shot at escaping the Jem'Hadar. Only one of the two attack ships was now destroyed, which meant their mission was not yet complete.

He surveyed his controls and managed to initiate backup power that allowed him to get an overview of the damage. "Life support, communications, and partial thrusters are operational," he said as he read the status display. "Structural integrity is critical. No weapons and the engines are fried," he added and then looked up. "You?"

"Not much better," she said her voice mirroring her dejection. "I have some shields and my impulse engine seems ok. Everything else is dead over here."

He fired his thrusters to move the shuttle. Without sensors, he would have to rely on his eyes to see what was happening around him. He found what he had been looking for. In the far distance, a battle was raging.

Except that it looked rather one-sided. The final remaining Jem'Hadar was giving *Eagle* a pounding as she desperately attempted to get away.

"She is not going to be able to take much more."

He nodded. The plan formed in his head almost instantly. It was a good plan with a very decent chance of success. There was just one catch. And it was a big one.

"Srena, did you say your impulse engines are still working?"

"Yes. But I don't have any weapons."

He didn't want to ask his next question but he knew he didn't have a choice. "How about the impulse burst? Does it still work?"

This time she hesitated as the implication began to settle in. "Yeah."

He knew she could have lied about it. Srena could have easily reported that the afterburner was as dead as most of her other systems. There wouldn't have been a way for him to find out for sure. In a sense, he wished that she had. That way he wouldn't have to consider his next order. When he looked back at the distant battle he knew there couldn't be any consideration. They had exactly one last shot at saving *Eagle* and her entire crew. They had to take it.

"Srena," he said slowly. "I need you to take out that Jem'Hadar ship. Do you think you can do that?"

There was a moment of silence. "Just because my call sign was Crash doesn't mean you have to take it literally."

He swallowed as he tried to find Srena by looking into the dark cockpit of her shuttle. He could see some movement but she was too far away for him to make out any details. It made this somewhat easier. "If we had transporters we could switch shuttles and I would do it myself," he

said. "Trust me I wish there was another way but this is the only chance we've got left to save *Eagle*."

"*You're serious about this, aren't you?*" she said, sounding far younger than to him that she had before. Like the recent Academy graduate that she was.

He thought he understood. For Srena their attack in these fast little fighters had been like a game. The entire war, the close battles they'd been through, the many Jem'Hadar they had faced, and the insanely risky maneuvers they had managed to pull off to survive, they had all been an exciting adventure for the young Andorian. The reality of uncompromising warfare hadn't quite caught up with her yet. Not until now that she had been asked to sacrifice her own life for a greater cause. It was a wakeup call for both of them and it had come too late.

Another glance into the distance revealed the Jem'Hadar attack ship unleashing burst after burst of deadly energy at *Eagle*. Her shields still flared, a telltale sign that they were not yet defeated. But with every second they hesitated, his ship—his home—was coming closer to the end.

Culsten looked back at Raptor-Two with determination burning in his eyes now. "We don't have a choice."

"There must be something else we—"

He cut her off harshly. "There isn't," he said, surprising himself by the firmness in his voice. "I am giving you a direct order, Ensign. Engage your impulse burst and take out that Jem'Hadar vessel." An immense amount of dread overcame him the moment those words had left his lips. He didn't recognize himself.

For a moment nothing happened and he couldn't deny a certain relief that Srena would disregard his order. Even if *Eagle* would be destroyed, he

could claim that he had tried everything in his power to save the ship. The thought sickened him.

Then her shuttle slowly turned away and sped up toward the distant battle.

"For what it's worth," he said as he watched her depart, "you always were the better pilot."

But Raptor-Two remained radio silent.

Then the afterburner kicked in with a bright flash and the shuttle was catapulted out of communications range. At her speed, she would manage to bridge the distance in less than a minute.

He watched with horror at what he had done, unable to take his eyes off the small craft. He wasn't sure how it had happened and why, all he could think about was the fact that he had just ordered a fellow officer—a friend—to her certain death. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the next sixty seconds would be the worst of his entire life.

## XV – THE STAND

"It should have been back by now," said Jana Tren with noticeable concern as she stood by the turbolift doors to the underground lab.

About five minutes earlier they had sent off the first group of six to the relative safety of the laboratory below. But the lift had not yet returned.

Owens' glance wandered into the other direction where they had assembled the next six individuals to take the lift. It hadn't been too difficult to prioritize the outpost's crew. Civilians and those with no combat experience were first while everybody who knew how to handle a phaser rifle would stay as long as possible to give the others a realistic chance to escape. Ideally, they would have all abandoned the control center by the time the Jem'Hadar would attack but Owens knew that time was working against them. With about thirty-eight people to evacuate using just the one lift would take time Owens very much doubted the Dominion would afford them.

The doors finally opened and both Tren and Owens sighed in relief when they found it empty.

"All right people," she said, gesturing to the next group. "Let's move."

The civilian researchers wasted no time at the chance to get out of harm's way and swiftly packed the small car.

"As soon as you get down, clear the lift and send it back up as quickly as possible," she said to the men and women inside the elevator.

Then the doors closed and the turbolift sped away again

Jana Tren turned to look at Owens. "Doctor Santesh-Yardo is not going to be happy about this plan. I wouldn't be surprised if he's raising all kinds of hell about it as we speak."

"The doctor is the least of my worries," he said and looked back at the line of people who were waiting to be evacuated. He gently took hold of her arm and led her a few steps away and out of earshot of the others. "Jan, I want you to be on the next one going down."

She looked at him, surprised, likely remembering how she had pointed a gun in his face not very long ago. It all that seemed forgotten now.

He could tell what she was thinking and quickly tried to counteract it. "You'd be just in the way up here. Go down there and smooth things out with Santesh-Yardo. Make sure he doesn't become a problem."

For a moment neither of them spoke as if only time would eventually reveal the obvious lie he had just told. Owens wanted her as far away from the Jem'Hadar as possible. After everything that had happened, he couldn't deny that he still cared for her deeply, no matter how much she had changed over the years. It hadn't taken him long to come to the realization that he was still in love with her and that was a hell of a difficult emotion to overcome.

"You know I can handle myself in a fight," she finally said, never taking her eyes off his.

"That's not the point."

"Then what exactly is the point?"

He didn't say. Or more accurately, he was not quite ready yet to put it into words. He didn't have to. She was Betazoid after all and more than able to pick up the intensity of his feelings.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

The voice was loud enough to force both Tren and Owens out of their private little moment and back into the world surrounding them. The female voice was coming from somewhere within the control room and he had a good idea who it belonged to.

Tren left one of the station’s officers in charge of the turbolift before both she and Owens left to find the source of the commotion.

“You don’t honestly think you can fool us twice, do you?” said Nora, keeping her phaser rifle pointed at Lieutenant Commander Shelby Monroe.

She had only just entered the room with Ensign McAllister at her side and was already red with anger at being held at gunpoint by the security officer. The crew members all around her kept their distance, nobody seemingly certain if intervening now wouldn’t make things a lot worse.

“Lieutenant?” Owens said as he and Tren stepped closer.

“Sir,” Nora said over her shoulder. “What should we do with *it*?”

“It?” Monroe said with disbelief.

Nora ignored her. “I say we vaporize that thing where it stands.”

“Now wait just a damned minute,” Monroe said but didn’t dare to move now that Nora’s intentions were unmistakably clear.

“We don’t have any indisputable proof that she is the changeling,” Tren said.

“Changeling?” said McAllister, giving first Nora and then Monroe a suspicious look.

“It killed the real Monroe and then tried to kill Commander Xylion. When that didn’t work you found yourself a new target, didn’t you?” she

said through clenched teeth, raising her rifle higher. “Captain, we can’t afford for this thing to kill again.”

“I am *not* a changeling,” Monroe said.

Xylion stepped next to Nora. “Agent Tren is correct. We cannot be certain that she is.”

Owens agreed. “Anybody could be the changeling.”

Nora shook her head. “Not anybody. We can rule out our away team.”

“How convenient for you,” Monroe said quietly.

“You want to be real careful in your position,” Nora shot back.

But Monroe was done being intimidated by the security officer and now took a bold step toward her. “Do I have to remind you, *Lieutenant*,” she said with a heavy emphasis on her rank, “that you’re addressing a senior officer?”

“You’re nothing to me but a potential threat.”

Monroe was about to retort when Owens cut her off. “All right, that’s enough,” he said and stepped up to Nora. “We need to concentrate on getting ready to defend ourselves against the Jem’Hadar.”

“Sir, I object to letting her move around unrestricted.”

But Owens had made his decision. “Stand down, Lieutenant. That’s an order.”

When Nora still didn’t budge Monroe worked up the courage to take the initiative. She stepped closer to Nora and then put her hand on the rifle and began to push it down. “If we make it through this,” she said with simmering anger underlying her words, “I promise you I’ll do whatever it

takes to assure that you'll scrub deuterium tanks for the rest of your career," she said as she looked straight into Nora's unwavering eyes.

Monroe managed to push the rifle away so it no longer pointed at her chest but Nora resisted her efforts to lower it completely, proving too strong for the other woman. They remained in a deadlock, neither willing to give in, their eyes shooting poisonous venom at each other.

"Commander," said Tren as softly as she could. "Perhaps you could find the captain and get our people on the outside to take defensive positions in here?"

Monroe looked away from Nora only very slowly. She eventually nodded at Tren and then abruptly turned. "Ensign," she said without looking at McAllister.

The young officer followed her hesitantly as if he was getting second thoughts about being that close to somebody just having been accused of being the enemy.

"I'll keep my eyes on you," Nora called after her.

Monroe decided to ignore the statement and briskly walked out.

Owens considered having a word with Nora about her behavior but then decided against it. He realized what she had lost when Edison had died. Besides, he also didn't fully trust Shelby Monroe. After all, he had no reason to doubt Xylion when he had reported that he had been attacked by a shapeshifter who had taken on her form. He also knew that changelings usually killed whoever they imitated. On the other hand, he couldn't ignore the possibility that the changeling had kept her alive on purpose to seed doubt and confusion within their ranks. That this particular shapeshifter liked to play games was obvious. As was the fact that it had a deadly purpose.

As much as Owens wanted to believe otherwise, there simply was no right action to take at the moment. They had to continue with their original plan and hope that they could catch the changeling before it had the chance to make its end move.

He gently placed a hand on Nora's shoulder. She turned to look at him. For a moment he could see the battle being fought behind her eyes. She was going through gut-wrenching pain while her need for swift vengeance and her sworn oath to defend her crew and her captain were fighting for prominence inside of her. There was sadness, anger, and a sense of duty all rolled into one but neither wanted to allow the other to take over entirely. Owens wished there was something he could do to help her but he understood that his options were limited.

"Are you all right?" he said.

She nodded with no hesitation. "We cannot trust her, sir," she said with utter conviction. "Not for one second."

"I know," he said. "But we have to deal with that later. For now, how do our defenses look?"

And with that, any sign of her internal struggle disappeared from her face. At least for now. "We found enough material to build somewhat solid barricades," she said, pointing at the rows of heavy crates and containers that had been dragged into the room to create two shoulder-high makeshift fortifications. "That should buy us a little time at least. I wish we could set up a force field but we don't have enough power."

He looked at the only entrance to the room, a heavy blast door not quite as thick as the ones they had found in the engineering compartment. It stood open at the moment.

"Once it is shut, I estimate the Jem'Hadar will need about one or two minutes to bring it down," she said as she followed his glance.

That was less time than he had hoped for. "And once they're in?"

She emphasized her rifle. "We fight them off for as long as we can. For our final retreat, I found a few surprises that just might give us a chance to get through this in more or less one piece."

"Good job, Laas. Get everyone into position; I fear our time is rapidly running out."

Nora gave her captain a sharp nod and then began to position the crew that remained behind the barricades and give them last-minute instructions.

In the back, Owens noticed that another group of evacuees had just boarded the turbolift. That left three more groups of non-combatants to go. The most difficult part of the plan, he knew, would be to manage to hold their position once they began to evacuate the twenty-something armed men that were left behind. Owens had to be realistic, not all of them would make it.

He looked at Tren who still stood nearby, holding her own phaser rifle with determination. She didn't need words to say it. She would stay as long as she had to. This was her mission; her responsibility, and she would carry it out until the bitter end.

He was still trying to think of a way to convince her otherwise when he heard the unmistakable pounding of boots rushing toward their position.

Everybody tensed up, readying their weapons.

"Incoming!"

\* \* \*

He knew the enemy was close. It was nothing more than distant shadows and indistinguishable sounds but it seemed obvious that one or more Jem'Hadar were positioned somewhere ahead of him.

Leva had been on his own for the last twenty minutes, separated by the fire team he had been asked to lead, he'd had little choice but to continue alone. He knew that the chances for him to complete the mission —to survive even—were minimal if he remained without the support of the skilled Marines for much longer. His only hope was that they would eventually find a way to rejoin him.

Right now, however, he had to face the enemy alone. The only other option was to cower in darkness and hold out for the chance that the Jem'Hadar would not come his way. He was not willing to go the coward way and decided for a preemptive strike instead, getting to the enemy before they could come to him.

There was one additional problem with the plan. He had no weapons save for a combat knife. It had to do, he decided, as he snuck forward, trying to surprise the enemy he knew was there.

He had turned off the torch he had carried and decided to use the scarce lighting available in the mine shaft to find his way, trying to diminish his enemy's chances of spotting his approach.

The downside, of course, was the fact that he could not see the enemy. But his well-honed intuition told him that they were close even if he could not make out any shapes or figures.

He continued quietly in the only direction he could. And then he froze. He could sense the presence of another. Much closer than he had anticipated. But something seemed very familiar about this situation, almost as if he had experienced this before.

And then he knew. He raised his knife and whipped to his side just in time to see an imposingly large man come out of the darkness where he had been hiding.

Leva was one second faster and it was all the time he needed. He shot out toward the enemy's waist and found a sidearm where he had expected it. He swiftly removed it, stepped back, and pointed the phaser at the Klingon's head.

D'Karr held the blade of his *bat'luth* just about a centimeter from Leva's throat.

Nobody moved. They were barely able to see each other's faces but Leva knew exactly who now stood in front of him and so did D'Karr.

"Impressive," D'Karr said. "I have underestimated you, Romulan," he added but kept the razor-sharp blade close to Leva's neck. "It will not happen again."

Leva didn't back off either. He was convinced that D'Karr would not have given a second thought to strike him down if he had not sensed the trap he had walked into. There would have been no witnesses and he could have easily claimed that he had died by the hand of the enemy. Leva was not going to make it that easy for him and held on tightly to the phaser.

"Is this how you fight your battles?" he said in disgust. "By staying in the shadows and slaying them without them ever laying eyes on you? Is that the great honorable way you Klingons are so proud of?"

D'Karr stepped out of the niche he had been hiding in and Leva was careful to match each of his steps, still fully aware that one wrong move could lead to his decapitation. "I did not expect you," he said. "I thought you were Jem'Hadar." He began to lower his sword.

But Leva had no intention of mirroring his move. He took two steps back but only to get out of his kill zone. As long as his phaser remained trained at him, he would have the upper hand. He reached for his flashlight with his free hand and activated it. As he had suspected, they were alone.

“What have you done to your team?”

The allegation hung in the air for a moment.

“What exactly are you accusing me of, Romulan?” he said with building rage in his voice.

“You set out with three men. Now I find you all by yourself. What do you think I’m accusing you of?”

“What about you?” he said. “Where are your men?”

“I’m asking the questions here,” Leva said. “What happened to them?”

“I don’t like your tone, Romulan,” he said simply and began to continue down the main shaft.

Leva kept his weapon trained on his back. “Get used to it. And you *will* answer me.”

D’Karr stopped. “Or what?” he said and turned around slowly. “You will shoot me?” He approached Leva again, now with a growing smile on his face. “That’s what you really want, isn’t it? It’s what you have wanted ever since the very first time I came onto your ship. Don’t even try to deny it. I recognize blood lust when I see it.”

Leva felt like taking another step backward as D’Karr continued to approach. But he knew he couldn’t show weakness. It was all the invitation

he would need. He held his ground and D'Karr came within a few centimeters of the phaser cone pushing into his chest.

"But your blood lust is different to what I have seen in your people," he continued. "Yours runs deeper. It is more vile, more personal. I'm right, aren't I? What is it that makes you want to kill me so desperately?"

Leva didn't flinch at D'Karr's words but he felt increasingly uncomfortable and he hated him for being able to make him feel that way. "You will not succeed in twisting this around. Where is the rest of your team?"

"If you want to shoot me, get it over with," D'Karr replied with equal fire in his voice.

"You killed them!" Leva shouted.

"Shoot me or get this weapon out of my face!"

"What have you done?"

"Shoot!" D'Karr struck out, hitting Leva's lower arm and sending the phaser flying out of his hand.

Leva had worked himself into a frenzy and needed no more justification to kill the man who attacked him. His other hand darted for his knife. But before he had the chance to bring it to bear, an energy blast impacted against the wall, not a meter from where he stood.

Both Leva and D'Karr jumped for cover. At least three Jem'Hadar soldiers had revealed themselves and were charging them. They had been arguing so loudly that they had made an easy target.

D'Karr had his *bat'luth* sword back out in an instant and Leva gripped his knife, having no time to look for the phaser he had lost when diving for cover.

Only now did Leva notice how close the enemy had gotten. D'Karr was already swinging his sword at the nearest Jem'Hadar and he had to act equally fast. He took two quick steps toward the enemy closest to him who was just getting ready for another shot. He managed to get to him just in time to wrap his hand around the enemy's rifle. He kept it from taking aim at him and locked eyes with the Jem'Hadar. He couldn't help but notice that he looked young, not much older than a human teenager, and most likely years younger. His eyes were blank, however, as if he was facing a machine and not a sentient life form.

They were deadlocked for a moment but Leva knew that the Jem'Hadar, who had the use of both his hands, would eventually win the struggle over the rifle. Without a second thought, he drove his knife hard into the soldier's midsection. The Jem'Hadar didn't even appear to feel the violent attack. Leva stabbed him again and again until he could feel his grip weakening and his hand was being soaked with the Jem'Hadar's life fluids.

The soldier went limp and Leva took hold of the rifle, firing it instantly at another approaching Jem'Hadar who sagged to the ground on impact.

Out of the corner of his eye, Leva could spot D'Karr, taking on two Jem'Hadar at once. But while Leva had to force himself to concentrate on defeating his opponents and keeping his anxieties in check, the Klingon seemed to relish the battle. Even when a Jem'Hadar blade sliced across his back he did not seem deterred. On the contrary, he began to lash out even faster, cutting down the soldier who had dared to injure him within seconds.

Leva was not impressed by his combat skills, not seeing a distinction between the natural-born warrior and the engineered soldiers they were facing.

His concentration had slipped, allowing one of the Jem'Hadar to close in on him and deliver a powerful blow to his solar plexus. Leva clenched his teeth in pain and tasted blood in his mouth. As if operating on instinct, he struck out with the butt of the rifle, connecting with the soldier with so much force that he went flying backward.

Instantly aware that another Dominion warrior was approaching, he aimed his weapon in his direction and activated the trigger. It misfired. He had no time to check his weapon as the charging Jem'Hadar was nearly on top of him, his blade seconds from slicing him in two.

Leva deflected the polearm with the rifle at the last moment and then, using the Jem'Hadar's momentum against him, he rammed his knee into the other man's midsection. The dazed Jem'Hadar lost his grip on the *kar'takin* he had been yielding and Leva happily took possession of it only to drive it hard through his chest.

He didn't have a second to spare to confirm the kill. Leva could feel a presence behind him. He freed the melee weapon and swung it around to sling it at whatever enemy was approaching.

It was a *bat'leth* sword that clashed against his polearm. And it was being wielded by D'Karr. There were no more Jem'Hadar to fight so the Klingon had turned on Leva and would have certainly struck him down if he hadn't reacted as quickly as he had.

They were in a gridlock, blade on blade.

Leva quietly cursed himself for having been so careless as to turn his back on D'Karr for more than a second. He should have known that as a Klingon he would kill indiscriminately no matter if friend or foe, weak or strong. Nobody knew this better than Leva. Nobody had wanted to accept this; nobody had understood. They had been fooled by promises of cooperation and alliances but none of them had factored in the true nature

of the Klingon mind. Nobody but him. And now it was just himself and the bloodthirsty D'Karr.

He knew only one of them would come out of this alive.

\* \* \*

*"We've got contacts!"* the voice repeated as it approached the command center. Moments later Shelby Monroe and a handful of men stormed into the room. "Jem'Hadar. Lots of them. And they're not even bothering to shroud," she said as she rushed toward Owens.

"Take your position," he said before he focused on Monroe. "Where are the others?"

"The captain and a few volunteers are trying to hold them up as long as they can," she said in between labored breaths. "I should get back out there and help."

He shook his head. "Negative. Take up position in here."

She shot him an icy stare but did what she was told. "We have to allow them to get back in here before we close those doors," she said as she climbed behind the first barricade.

"It was their decision to stay behind," Nora said. "We close them now."

"They're trying to give us a fighting chance. I not leaving them out there to die."

"We will give them as long as we can," Owens said, quickly interrupting their renewed debate.

That seemed to satisfy Monroe but Nora kept her eyes firmly on the other woman as though her presence was a much greater threat than the hordes of Jem'Hadar just moments away from assaulting their position.

Owens didn't pay it much attention. He made sure that Jana Tren was taking up position close to him where he could keep an eye on her. "Don't aim too high," he said, "and keep your weapon steady when you fire. I know it's not going to be easy but try to keep your breathing as regular as you can."

She looked at him with a small smile, though he didn't miss the pearls of sweat beginning to form on her forehead. "Short, controlled bursts," she said. "I know. I've been through the drill."

"Listen," he said more quietly, "if you think you can't handle it or you feel they're getting too close, don't think twice about retreating toward the back."

She held his glance. "Is that an offer you extend to all of us? Does Lieutenant Nora or Commander Xylion have that same option?"

He didn't have an answer for her.

"I didn't think so," she said and focused on the open doors again. "Michael, this is as much my fight as it is yours, perhaps even more. I'll be right here at your side," she added and then gave him a sidelong glance. "Where I belong."

Owens nodded slowly. His focus was torn away from her when he heard voices and screams coming from outside. They were getting closer.

"Stand by to seal the door," he shouted.

As the first figure appeared by the door he nearly squeezed the trigger and then swiftly chastised himself for his skittishness.

It was Ensign Germaine McAllister and he was helping a seemingly injured Captain Zalak into the room, keeping him up with one arm around his shoulder.

A third crewman appeared, providing cover for the two. Owens and the rest of the men watched helplessly as the crewman was mowed down by an explosion of weapons fire less than a meter away from the open entrance to the control room.

"Shut this door, shut the damn door!" Zalak shouted as soon as he and McAllister had set foot into the room.

"Do it," he said to Nora.

She must have had her finger on the controls already as the door came down not a second later, slamming shut with a loud clank.

Monroe left her position to help McAllister bring Zalak behind the barricade. "Do you need medical assistance?" she asked her captain.

He shook his head. "Just give me a weapon and get ready to fight," he said with little hesitation. "These damn things took out all my people." There was fire in his voice.

Owens wasn't quite sure if to congratulate or castigate him for putting himself in danger as he had done. He might have given them a few more seconds but at what price? He decided to keep those thoughts to himself as he focused on the task at hand.

The room fell into eerie silence. There were no more noises coming from beyond the sealed doors as the Jem'Hadar were most likely assessing the best way to get through their next obstacle. Inside, nobody spoke. Every single man and woman armed with a weapon was now standing or kneeling behind the first barricade, their eyes and weapons trained at the door in front of them. Most of them were sweating profusely. Everybody

knew that their life might come to an abrupt end within the next minutes and yet most tried to ban those devastating thoughts out of their heads.

They gripped their rifles more firmly, clenched their teeth more tightly, and narrowed their eyes more sharply to think of the one and only thought that mattered now. Kill as many of them as you can, as fast as you can.

For many, including Owens, the waiting was the worst part of the battle. The tension in the room ran so high that he thought he could not only hear his heartbeat but at least a dozen others as well.

He allowed himself a quick look around the room to perhaps catch a last glimpse at the men and women who would fight at his side. Some of which were his crew, his friends, and perhaps even more.

Nora Laas stood at the far end of the first barricade and even though she had been through hell in the last few hours, maybe more so than the rest of them, she looked the least anxious about what was to come. She had been here before many times. She had been a fighter since childhood and Owens was certain that if nobody else would make it through this, she would.

Louise Hopkins stood next to her and the reason for that seemed obvious. She was the least experienced in *Eagle*'s away team. She had never been in a position like this before—except perhaps in simulated combat at the Academy or while taking part in Nora's mandatory training session she had started for all of *Eagle*'s crew shortly after the war had broken out, and therefore she wanted to be close to somebody who knew exactly what they were doing. And Nora would make sure to watch out for her less combat-experienced friend.

Xylion seemed calm and calculated and Owens imagined that it was exactly what he was doing at the moment. Calculating. How to best hold his weapon, how to inflict the maximum amount of damage, and how to

ensure their plan would work with a minimum of casualties. His tranquility also helped to make those around him less agitated.

DeMara Deen looked most out of place in the room. Even though her golden hair was wet and slightly less brilliant from perspiration she still looked oddly out of place on a battlefield. She might never have known about war when she was growing up on her home world but now she presented herself as much a professional as Xylion and Nora.

The Epsilon Twelve crew was a mixture of utter concentration and obvious desperation. To their credit, their leaders, Zalak and Monroe, were completely dedicated to the task at hand. If either of them was a changeling, Owens couldn't tell. McAllister who was now the highest-ranking officer next to the captain and Monroe seemed less self-assured and kept rubbing the palms of his sweaty hands against his pant legs.

"And you, good yeomen, show us here the mettle of your pasture. Let us swear that you are worth your breeding—which I doubt not. For there is none of you so mean and base that hath not noble luster in your eyes."

Owens turned to look to his left. The words had been spoken quietly by Tren. He offered her a small smile when he realized that she had remembered one of the passages from one of his favorite works of literature. The words seemed chillingly appropriate.

"I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, straining upon the start," Owens continued. "The game's afoot: Follow your spirit; and upon this charge..."

"*Cry God for Harry, England, and Saint George.*" Both of them concluded in unison as their eyes redirected toward the blast door.

As if on cue, a loud metallic noise echoed from the entrance.

"Steady," Zalak said.

An ear-shuttering explosion ripped the door to pieces.

"Fire!"

All hell broke loose.

\* \* \*

D'Karr shifted his weight ever so slightly and Leva took advantage of the opportunity. Pushing him back with all his strength, he managed to dislodge D'Karr's weapon and then quickly followed up with another strike. He wasted no time, aiming straight at the Klingon's head. D'Karr brought up his weapon to deflect the blow but only barely. The razor-sharp blade grazed his face, leaving behind a low cut on his cheek.

D'Karr didn't seem to care. But the sight of his own blood spurred him on and just like that the tables turned with D'Karr goings on the offensive, delivering one powerful blow after another.

Leva could feel his grip on his weapon weaken and before he had a chance to find some room to withdraw, the polearm was ripped out of his hands, leaving him defenseless.

D'Karr used his large sword to pull his feet away from underneath his body and throw Leva to the ground. With one swift motion, he brought the *bat'lath* up against his opponent's throat.

For Leva, it was all over and he knew it. But D'Karr hesitated.

"What are you waiting for?"

The question elicited a curious look from D'Karr. "Do you wish to die, Romulan?"

"I am ready to die," he lied, "content with the knowledge that I have finally proven your true and undeniable nature. Kill me like you killed all the others. With no remorse or regret. The women, the children, the old folk, it makes no difference to you, does it? All you need is to see others destroyed by your hands. It doesn't matter if they can fight or not. Nothing matters to you animals but to satisfy your unbridled bloodlust. So go ahead. But I promise you this, my comrades and all of Starfleet will eventually learn what has happened here. They will hold you and all Klingons responsible for all the lives you've taken. The lives of those you claimed to be your allies. They will know." Leva's voice had taken on a zealous tone, condemning not just one man but an entire race of people and their culture. It was no longer an opinion or a belief but profound personal memory that fueled his sermon.

D'Karr lowered his *bat'luth*. "What are you talking about?" he said, for the first time sounding genuinely confused and irritated.

Leva answered by reaching out for the sword and ripping it out of the D'Karr's hands. But instead of turning it on the other man he discarded it. He jumped up grabbed hold of the Klingon's collar and pushed him hard into the wall. "You're all just killers," he said, practically spitting the words. "It's all you are. Why are you denying your nature?"

D'Karr easily freed himself and harshly pushed Leva back. "You are insane."

"I am not the one who killed women and children, you are," he said but did not attempt another attack. The memories were coming back now. The horrific screams of agony and the countless pleas for mercy, all of which had gone unanswered. His friends and family he saw being taken

apart in front of his very eyes. He had been so young and so frightened back then. It had debilitated him just like it did now.

D'Karr approached carefully. "Something happened to you, didn't it? You witnessed something. A massacre?"

Leva turned away. He didn't want to listen. Not to him, not to a Klingon. What could he know about pain and suffering except how to cause it?

"I can see it in your eyes," D'Karr continued. "Your hate for my kind runs deeper than in other Romulans. Is it because of what they did to you?"

"They killed them all," he said quietly, his back still turned to D'Karr. "They came to our world without warning. They slaughtered whole cities, leaving behind nothing but corpses and dust. They massacred the children and women. My friends. My family," he turned around. "You don't care, you kill everything that lives."

D'Karr didn't reply right away. "I am not going to make excuses or apologies for what some Klingons have done in the past."

Leva dismissed his statement.

"But not all Klingons are the same. I have never killed children or defenseless civilians and neither has any member of my house. It would not be honorable."

"I am sick to death to hear about your honor. Where was that honor when those Klingons came to my planet?"

D'Karr merely shrugged and turned away. "Who knows? Maybe they were renegade troops or maybe they were cowards," he said and found his *bat'lath*. "To be honest, I don't care. I do care about the Romulans that came to Narendra III to slaughter Klingons," he added and turned back to face

Leva. "Do you think they made a difference between women and children? And what about the four thousand souls the Romulans massacred at Khitomer? It didn't matter to them who they killed as long as it was Klingon blood they spilled."

"It's not the same."

D'Karr raised his sword in Leva's direction. "My house lost many good men at Khitomer, including young and old," he said with anger flaring up in his voice. "I might not have been there but the stories are as cruel as anything I've ever heard."

Nobody spoke. Leva felt irritated and confused. All his life he had been so comfortable in his hate for Klingons. And it had been easy too. He had never spoken to a Klingon before, never cared for what they had to say. But now how could he ignore what he knew to be right? The Khitomer Massacre and Narendra III were incidents well documented by Starfleet. A million conflicting emotions were now racing through his mind as it desperately tried to make sense of emotions and facts.

He turned to pick up a Jem'Hadar rifle and a torch and then began to walk down the shaft.

"Where are you going?" D'Karr said.

Leva stopped and turned around. "We are here to find the captain and the away team and I intend on doing that."

D'Karr simply stared at him.

Leva turned back around and continued down the shaft. "Are you coming or not?" he said without looking back.

D'Karr said nothing but collected his gear and followed Leva, keeping a respectable distance.

\* \* \*

Perhaps hell was the wrong word to describe the chaos that had ensued in Epsilon Twelve's auxiliary control room.

At least in hell, there was some sense of certainty that things couldn't get much worse, or at least so Owens believed. On the battlefield he stood on now, nothing was certain. Already he had seen a handful of the Starfleet crew fall and while they had managed to cut down the first two waves of Jem'Hadar soldiers there simply was no stopping them. For every one they killed three more took their place.

He fired his rifle relentlessly into the blur of gray bodies in front of him. At first, he had tried to pick his targets but now it seemed pointless. The smartest thing was to keep shooting and not to stop. The problem, of course, was that his weapon did not possess unlimited energy. A fleeting glance at the floor revealed that he had only two fully charged power cells left, at the rate he was discharging his weapon, he'd be lucky if that lasted him another two minutes.

He still sensed Jana Tren's presence at his side. She had moved closer to him ever since the shooting had started and he wasn't sure if it was for comfort or out of practicability. And even through all of the chaos and noise of battle, and the smell of burned flesh and plastics in the air, he could still somehow pick up the scent of her hair. It was no longer the same as it had been many years ago but he had rapidly begun to like it.

He couldn't afford to concentrate on Tren. A group of Jem'Hadar had just overwhelmed their left flank and pushed deeper into the room. But they were not trying to finish off the Starfleet defenders; instead, they were

headed straight for the back, toward the elevator and the remaining civilian scientists waiting to be evacuated.

Owens found Nora close by. "Lieutenant!"

She saw him gesturing toward the intruding Jem'Hadar. Without hesitation, she grabbed two officers nearby and left her cover to intercept the charging soldiers.

"Watch out," yelled Tren.

Owens turned back just in time to see a Jem'Hadar soldier collapse within a meter in front of him. He had been cut down by Tren just a heartbeat away from reaching him.

"Thanks," he said and continued to fire at the next wave of approaching Jem'Hadar.

"We can't hold this position any longer," she said in a strained tone. "Zalak and Monroe are beginning to lose ground."

Owens continued firing but afforded himself a glance to the right flank where the Bolian officer and his second-in-command had begun to take on the Jem'Hadar at extremely close range. The remaining attackers had taken note of this weakness as well and were shifting their focus on pushing through.

Owens guessed that they had less than a minute before they were overrun. "Fall back! Fall back!"

He gestured at the few remaining crewmembers at his side to retreat to the second barricade behind them. Within moments most of the defenders took action, attempting to leave their quickly crumbling cover. Three were killed instantly, never even getting the chance to re-position themselves.

Owens fired at two Jem'Hadar at near point-blank range as he tried to stay behind as long as possible to cover their short retreat. To his horror, Tren stayed true to her word and remained by his side.

"I'm out," she said with dread in her voice.

Owens wasn't much better off. A Jem'Hadar soldier was bearing down on her, approaching at full speed and she had no means of defending herself. While he saw the charge from the corner of his eye, he couldn't allow himself to switch targets for even a second or risk being blasted instantly. Without thinking he freed one arm and roughly pushed her backward and over the crates making up the second barricade. She landed roughly but Owens ignored her moans. He rammed the front part of his rifle into the charging Jem'Hadar's mid-section, ripping the air out of the soldiers' lungs. His index finger jammed down hard on the trigger and the weapon emitter cone exploded into his chest.

Owens had not expected the recoil effect. The powerful energy blast found immediate resistance and catapulted him backward and over the barricade while tearing a gaping hole into the Jem'Hadar. The fall saved his life as not an instant later, an advancing enemy soldier had reached the now abandoned outer barrier and opened fire, missing him by a hairline.

Owens could hear his bones as he landed harshly on his back right next to Tren. His eyes found hers. For a moment they simply looked at each other as if the world around them had not gone mad. They shared a moment that seemed to exist only in their minds.

That moment of course was over before it had even begun when a shadow fell over them. They looked up to see the towering figure of a massive Jem'Hadar warrior. He looked like a giant towering over insects as he stood right on top of the barricade above them.

Owens knew instantly that they were doomed. His rifle had toppled out of his grip after his forceful landing and Tren's weapon was out of power.

The Jem'Hadar smiled as he appeared to relish the sight of his defenseless prey below his feet. He considered them for less than a second before taking aim with his rifle.

He took too much time. An energy blast cut through his neck and his head jerked backward with his body following an instant later.

Owens and Tren jumped back up at the same time, neither finding the time to contemplate their near death nor allowing for the bliss of being still alive to take over. Their demise only appeared to have been delayed.

Tren easily caught a fresh energy cell that had been thrown her way. She jammed it into her rifle in one swift motion and joined Owens in returning fire as if nothing had happened.

He noticed that the Jem'Hadar had been slowed slightly now that they had to cross another obstacle to get to them. But between the two barriers he could spot several Starfleet uniforms among the dead Jem'Hadar. Alive or dead seemed to matter little now; they would not be able to help them.

Nora came up from behind, taking a knee next to him and adding her phaser to the slimming number of defenders. From the look in her eyes, he had no doubt that it had been she who had cut down the Jem'Hadar who had been so close to ending both him and Tren.

"Report," he said even while keeping his phaser running hot.

She shook her head as she spoke. "They got to at least half the people in the back," she said right away. "The last of them are on the way to the lab as we speak. The lift should be back any moment now."

Owens had no choice but to take his eyes off the battlefield. He ducked for cover and quickly examined the back. There were several unmoving bodies, most of them drenched in blood. Besides the dead nobody had remained. His eyes darted across the room, doing a rough count in the process. He estimated besides himself and Tren only about ten crewmembers were left, fighting a quickly losing battle. He had insisted that Hopkins and Deen left for the lab earlier. Without the time to argue they had quickly followed his instructions and made it safely into the lift. That meant that only Xylion and Nora from his crew, and roughly seven from Epsilon Twelve, including Zalak, Monroe, and McAllister remained.

He replaced the power cell of his weapon—the last one he could find—and came back up firing. “Laas, go down the line and get everybody ready to move. And you better have those surprises ready that you promised me.”

A vicious grin came over her lips just before she tugged in her head and made her way along the barricade.

“Mike,” Tren said in between shots, evading the incoming fire. “There are more people here than we have room for in the turbolift.”

“I know,” he said so quietly he doubted that she had heard him.

The remaining defenders managed to disable at least twenty more Jem’Hadar whose dead bodies were beginning to cover the entirety of the floor, making it more difficult for their remaining brethren to advance.

It became quickly apparent, however, that they did no longer have the numbers to hold the second barricade or for that matter the room. The first barrier had been practically pulverized by now, neutralizing the obstacle for the Jem’Hadar.

Owens caught Nora’s sign. They were ready. He quickly glanced behind him. The turbolift had returned and stood by to deliver six of them

to safety. Less than ten meters separated Owens and the others from the lift but it may as well have been ten kilometers. He silently prayed that whatever Nora had in mind was going to be good enough to avoid turning this place into their final resting ground.

Owens gave her the nod to proceed. She acknowledged and then disappeared.

Dread was quickly beginning to fill him so completely, that he feared it would paralyze him. Another glance across the room confirmed that some of the defenders had stopped firing as they had run out of ammunition.

Time had run out.

He felt something bounce against his foot. He looked down to find a small round device that had rolled up to him. The silver-colored ball was devoid of any features save for a small red indicator light that was now flashing at an increasingly faster pace.

He spotted Nora nodding at him from further down the barricade. She picked up a very similar device and flung it into the approaching mass of Jem'Hadar.

Owens understood and quickly followed suit. Moments later half a dozen of the devices dropped onto their enemies.

Each one exploded in a massive detonation, ripping the Jem'Hadar apart and tossing them into the air like ragdolls. The thunderous noise that accompanied each explosion threatened to rupture his eardrums. The force of the detonations was powerful enough to tear many of the soldiers apart limb from limb, showering the room with grisly blood and body parts. He and the others were spared from most of the carnage as a thick wall of fog instantly followed the explosions, drastically reducing visibility from one second to the next.

It was their last, best chance at a retreat.

Owens took the lead, stood, and reached for Tren. He grabbed her arm and pushed her callously toward the lift. He could tell by the expression on her face that he was hurting her but at that moment he didn't care. He just wanted her in that lift. "Go!" he shouted and then turned to the others. "Go! Now!"

Tren pierced him with a dark glare at his rough handling but complied, making haste for the back. She was joined not a moment later by the rest of the Starfleet officers, each one now running for their lives not even daring to look back.

A handful remained behind, including Owens and Nora, firing blindly into the dense fog that had settled over the battlefield, even as they walked backward and toward the lift.

Figures began to emerge from the mist. The Jem'Hadar were regrouping faster than Owens had anticipated. He cut down the first two he could spot but within seconds there were more than he could possibly target. He quickened his pace.

He knew they had to get out now. He turned just in time to see Tren stumbling over the dead body of one of the unlucky defenders killed earlier. Another crewmember—he didn't know his name—helped her back onto her feet only to be pierced by two energy blasts coming out of the fog. Tren watched the young man in silence as he screamed in pain and collapsed to the ground. She wanted to reach out and help him even though it seemed doubtful he was still alive.

"Jana, move, damnit!" Owens shouted at her.

She left her doomed rescuer be and hurried into the lift.

Someone grabbed Owens from behind pushing him forward. It was Nora. "Sir, we have to get out of here!" she shouted as she continued to push him while firing at every target she could find, every blast connecting with an enemy.

She wasn't taking no for an answer and didn't let up. When Owens turned back around again, he realized that while the fog was beginning to thin it was also spreading deeper into the room, making it near impossible to distinguish between friend and foe. He spotted dozens of shapes and he could no longer be sure which ones were the enemy.

He took Nora's advice and made a run for it. No longer paying attention to what was happening behind him, he simply darted for the lift. He arrived seconds later, finding Tren and Xylion already waiting for him. Nora was the next one in.

"Are you all right?" he asked her straight away.

"Yes, but some of our people are still alive out there," she said. "I can sense them."

He turned. Two figures were approaching the lift. He brought up his rifle instinctively but before he could even consider firing both collapsed, having been shot from behind. He could only make out a hand that had belonged to one of the bodies, now lying motionless on the ground a few short meters away from the lift. It was distinctly human.

"We can't wait any longer," Nora said. "If we stay nobody will get out alive."

"Give them another few seconds," Tren said as she and the others went on their knees to avoid incoming fire.

Another figure emerged and Nora took immediate aim.

"Hold your fire," said Owens who noticed something familiar about the shape. It was a humanoid man and he appeared dark and bald-headed.

It was Germaine McAllister who arrived with heavy, labored breaths.

"Is anybody else out there?" Owens said.

But the young ensign seemed too exhausted, too shaken up to speak.

Owens wanted to try again to get an answer out of the scared young man but was interrupted by Xylion.

"Sir."

Xylion indicated toward another approaching figure. She was female and before Owens even knew who she was, Nora had quickly the entrance to the lift, pointing her phaser straight at the newcomer and keeping her from getting inside. "Not a chance you're coming in here."

If looks could kill, Nora would have been burned alive on the spot by Shelby Monroe's piercing eyes. "Step aside, Lieutenant."

An energy blast missed the two women by what felt like a hair's length, before it slammed into the back of the lift, rattling the small car.

Tren winced in pain.

Owens whipped around, finding her on the floor. The blast had struck her in the arm, blood quickly drenching her sleeve.

"Get this lift moving, now!" He knelt next to the injured Tren.

"Understood," Nora said but kept her eyes on Monroe. "But you're not coming."

"You will not leave me behind!"

With relief he found Tren still conscious, her face was a grimace of pain, however. She was holding her injured arm, tears shooting into her eyes from the agony she felt. She still managed to glance up at him, a determined look on her face. "Take her."

He nodded. "Lieutenant," he said while working on a makeshift bandage. "Get Commander Monroe in here and let's get this goddamn thing moving."

Nora turned to him as if he had just lost his mind. "Sir, she's a changeling. If we take her we won't get to the lab alive."

"Now," he said in a voice as firm as steel. He would allow no more argument over the issue. All their lives were hanging by a quickly unraveling thread and every second they delayed it was coming closer to snapping clear off.

Nora seemed to finally realize this. She pointed her rifle straight at Monroe's forehead. "Your weapon."

Two more purple-hued energy blasts hit the interior of the lift in quick succession, nearly vaporizing Xylion's head.

"What?"

"You want to come? Surrender your weapon."

Monroe didn't hesitate and handed over her phaser rifle. Nora took it and swiftly stepped aside. Monroe nearly jumped into the lift.

A Jem'Hadar leaped out of the fog like a shark breaking the surface to come in for the kill. He was getting close enough to reach the still stationary car.

"Computer," Xylion said in a calm tone of voice that belied the chaos around them, "depart."

Nora in the meantime had spotted the Jem'Hadar practically flying toward them and brought up both the rifles she was holding, even as she turned to face the incoming threat. Twin beams slammed into the Jem'Hadar in mid-air, stopping his forward momentum and pushing him away.

They never saw his body hit the floor as the doors finally closed shut and the lift set in motion.

## XVI – UNDERGROUND

Nora Laas never took her eyes or the two phaser rifles off the unarmed Shelby Monroe, fully cognizant by now that a shapeshifter didn't need weapons to kill.

The commander ignored the security chief entirely and instead focused on the only other officer of her crew who had made it out of the auxiliary control room. "What happened to the captain?"

Germaine McAllister looked at her and then at Nora as if he needed permission to speak to her.

"I asked you a question, Ensign," Monroe said more forcefully.

McAllister slowly shook his head. "He didn't make it. I watched them slaughter him. There ... there was nothing I could do," he said in an unsteady tone. "I should've tried harder."

"You did what you could," she said in a tone too sharp to befit the sentiment.

In the meantime, Ownes had managed to control Tren's bleeding wound. He was not going to be able to stop it but he had slowed it and the injury didn't appear to be life-threatening.

"I'm sorry," he said, quietly enough for only her to hear him.

She looked into his eyes with surprise. "For what?"

"I know I pushed you pretty hard up there."

She cracked a smile. "I suppose I was being a bit stubborn."

"You can say that again."

"Hey," she said with feigned anger.

He mirrored her smile.

The lift came to a stop and the doors parted.

Owens helped her back on her feet and as they stepped out, they quickly found a large gathering of people welcoming them. Owens sighed with relief to find Deen and Hopkins uninjured.

"Are you the last group?" Deen asked as she looked over the survivors. She hid well that she had never been happier to see Owens alive and well. But so many others had already given their life that it was exceedingly difficult for her to feel anything but anguish over everything that had happened so far.

He nodded sadly.

Tren stepped up to a nearby computer console. "I'm initiating a complete lockdown of the facility," she said as she went to work.

Owens wanted to stop her and remind her to take it easy now that she was injured but he understood what she had to do. "How safe exactly are we down here."

She finished entering a few commands, promptly shutting down the open turbolift doors. Explosions up above them caused the floor to shudder and everyone present gasped as they looked up, fearing that the ceiling would come down on them at any moment.

When Tren looked back at Owens her face was a mask of utter confidence. "I just collapsed the only access point to this lab. There is no way for the Jem'Hadar to get to us."

Hopkins stepped forward. "Wait a minute," she said, "does that mean we're trapped down here?"

She slowly nodded her head.

Doctor Santesh-Yardo, the lead scientist on the Archangel project, pushed himself through the crowd of people around Tren and Owens. He looked panicked. "Who is responsible for this?" he said once he had made it through the crowd. "What is the meaning of this? You can't all be down here."

"Doctor," Owens said. "We didn't have a choice."

But the Grazerite didn't want to hear it. Instead, he singled out Tren. "You of all people should've known better than to bring all these people down here. What is the matter with you?"

She didn't seem perturbed by the accusations. She had not liked the idea either but in hindsight, she had to admit that it had been their only option. "Doctor, if we hadn't come down here the Jem'Hadar would have \_\_\_\_\_"

"You don't know that." he protested, interrupting her. "By bringing these people here you have seriously endangered—"

"Will you shut up for one damn minute," she fired back in a booming voice.

Santesh-Yardo was stunned into silence.

Every other conversation in the room had ceased instantly and all eyes now rested on her. Equally surprised by her outburst, Owens took a small step toward her but stopped when she raised a hand to keep him back. She calmly brushed through her sweat-drenched black hair before she spoke again. "I apologize, Doctor," she said quietly, visibly trying to center herself again after having lost control.

But Santesh-Yardo couldn't quite find the words.

She took a sharp breath before continuing in a calm and steady tone. "The fact of the matter is that we are down here now. Buried under hundreds of tons of solid rock, completely cut off from the outside world. I estimate we have enough air, power, and food to stay alive for at least a week. That is if the Jem'Hadar don't find a way to get to us by then. Otherwise, unless any form of rescue arrives, all of us, as well as Archangel are finished. Those are the facts and there isn't a thing we can do to change them now."

The large underground lab remained entirely silent. Everyone needed a few moments to come to terms with the implications of her explanation. Only a few minutes earlier most of them had been faced with a quick and violent death by the Jem'Hadar, now they were looking at a slow and miserable demise with plenty of time to think about how they would face the end.

Most of the scientists and Starfleet officers began to scatter, there was plenty of room in the lab and the adjacent facilities for each of them to find their own space.

"Doctor," Owens said and approached Santesh who appeared to have calmed since Tren's outburst. His eyes were now focusing on the large device behind the scientist. "Archangel is supposed to kill Jem'Hadar, is it not?"

He quickly shook his head. "I know what you're thinking and the answer is no."

Owens offered him a hard glare. "This is not the time to keep playing the secrecy game."

"I'm not," he said defensively. "We're still weeks away from having Archangel ready to be deployed. At the moment the electro-magnetic pulse it emits is highly erratic. We have no idea what it will do to the Jem'Hadar at this stage. Besides, it suffers from critical power fluctuations."

“What would happen if we turned it on?”

“The induction matrix is not able to convert all the required power to meet the modulation requirements to allow the flow regulators —”

“In plain English, Doctor.”

“It would self-destruct and probably eradicate everything in a two-kilometer radius along with it,” Santesh said.

“Well if you were looking for a quicker way to get us out of our misery you found it,” Deen said with little apparent humor. Even the eternal optimist could no longer contest reality.

Hopkins had a more practical idea. “The thing is overheating its main power coils because it cannot adapt to the immense power it requires to initiate the electromagnetic waves it has to output,” she said more to herself than to anybody in particular.

Santesh regarded her with a suspicious look, probably unsure if to be impressed by her understanding or concerned that she had already figured out what made the best-kept secret in the Federation tick. “Correct.”

“Do you have a solution, Lieutenant?” Owens said, eliciting a scowl from Santesh-Yardo who seemed to refuse to accept that this young woman could solve a problem they hadn’t been able to overcome in weeks.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Somebody could manually adjust the influx matrix, I suppose.”

Santesh shook his head. “That would work for maybe a few minutes at best.”

Hopkins nodded in agreement.

“I don’t see how any of this will help us now,” said Tren. “In case you have forgotten, we are buried deep underground with no way out.”

Owens looked at her, realizing that she was still in pain even if she was doing a masterful job at trying to hide it "You need medical attention. Do you have supplies down here?"

"There's a small infirmary in the back," she said.

"Let me take you," he said and then to Hopkins and Santesh. "I want you to keep thinking of a way to get this machine working." He ignored their incredulous looks as he began to lead Tren away.

"Lieutenant, if you don't get these goddamned weapons out of my face soon, I swear I'll lose it."

Owens sighed and both he and Tren turned to see a fuming Shelby Monroe, ready to lash out at Nora who stood just a few short meters away, keeping her phaser rifles pointed at the commander.

"Go ahead," Nora said, "give me a reason."

Doctor Santesh had not yet noticed that Monroe was apparently being kept as a prisoner and was now quickly approaching the scene. "What is going on here?"

"Keep your distance, Doctor," Nora said, keeping her eyes on the blond-haired officer. "This one is a shapeshifter."

Panic flashed across the Grazerites' face. "You brought a changeling down here?" he almost squeaked. "Are you insane?" He quickly stepped back, his eyes darting to find Owens.

The captain sighed. "Go ahead," he said to Tren. "I deal with this and catch up with you."

But Tren was clearly reluctant to do so and hesitated.

"Please," he said calmly.

She finally nodded and left to head to find the infirmary.

Owens approached Santesh, Nora, and her prisoner. "We are not certain that she is a shapeshifter, Doctor," he said and then looked at Nora. "But we need to find a solution to this. If she is a changeling, we must deal with her accordingly."

"We don't have the facilities down here to restrain a changeling," Santesh said.

"We should never have brought her down here to begin with," Nora said, keeping her eyes glued on the other woman.

Monroe took a small step toward Owens but stopped when Nora moved in her way. Both guns leveled at her head.

"I am done with this," she said. "Take a blood sample. That'll prove I am who I say I am."

"Nice try," Nora said. "But you may have killed the real Monroe and absorbed her blood in case you needed it."

"There might be another way," Santesh said.

Owens considered him with a quizzical expression.

"We developed an anti-changeling serum to kill shapeshifters. We gave up on it once we began to concentrate on Archangel but in theory, the substance should be able to tell us if she is a changeling," he said, nervously looking back and forth between Owens and Monroe.

"What kind of substance is this?" Monroe said.

"Getting scared?" Nora said with a vicious smile.

She ignored the Bajoran. "What kind of effect will it have on non-changelings?"

Owens turned to Santesh. "It's a valid question."

"We cannot be certain. You must understand that we never got into the testing phase either with changelings or otherwise. But the formula contains an extremely high concentration of zellizine which will be rather unpleasant, if not deadly to most humanoids. Theoretically, it would force any changeling to return to its glutinous form."

Monroe took a small step back, deep concern now mirrored on her face. "You can't ask me to take poison."

Nora smirked. "How soon can you have it ready?"

"Ten minutes, maybe less," Santesh said.

Owens looked at Monroe who suddenly seemed a lot less sure of herself. He couldn't tell if it was because she feared being revealed for what she truly was or because the procedure could end up killing her. "Get it ready," he said and walked away.

"Captain," Monroe called after him. "You can't let them do this."

But Owens was trying hard to ignore her. He didn't turn, didn't even slow as he left the lab with a determined stride.

"I think I'm going to enjoy this," Nora said.

\* \* \*

It had become quickly obvious that they were on the right track. The mine shafts had become wider and were noticeably more recent and symmetrical than the tunnels they had traversed before.

The most obvious indication that they were close to their target came when they reached a large chamber lit well enough to reveal an entire unit of Jem'Hadar soldiers.

Leva and D'Karr took position near a ledge that dropped deep into the cavern below. Besides the Jem'Hadar, the chamber was also filled with various machinery, some of which looked as if it had been used only very recently.

"There must be at least forty men down there," said Leva, lying flat on his stomach next to the Klingon and looking down at the cavern floor a good ten meters below.

"We can take them."

"You can't be serious," he said, shooting the other man a skeptical look. "There is no chance the two of us could—" he stopped mid-sentence when he spotted the small grin forming on the Klingon's lips. "A joke?"

"Who said Klingons don't have a sense of humor?"

Leva turned back to look down at the assembled enemy force.

"Although it would be a glorious battle," D'Karr said quietly.

"Gloriously short," Leva said. "It looks like they are working on something at that far wall." The Jem'Hadar he was referring to were moving back and forth near the wall setting up a device of sorts but he couldn't identify what it was. "The rest of them seem to be just waiting."

Something else had caught D'Karr's attention and he quickly moved away from the edge. "We're not alone."

"You think?"

Once he was clear of the ledge he pounced back onto his feet, reaching immediately for his *bat'leth*.

This startled Leva and he followed suit, reaching for his weapon. He was not going to be the fool to get himself killed because he didn't heed a warning, he told himself. "More Jem'Hadar?"

D'Karr didn't reply. He carefully scanned their surroundings. Their position was not ideal to fight off an attack, Leva realized. They were cut off on one side by the ledge and three other paths led up or down from their position. The enemy could approach from any of those directions.

D'Karr's body tensed and Leva couldn't help but worry. They were completely exposed on all sides.

Then he lowered his sword, throwing Leva a somewhat annoyed glance. "I know this smell."

"What smell?"

"Humans."

Leva perceived movement from the corner of his eye and whipped around to face whoever was trying to sneak up on them. He was immediately outnumbered and outgunned.

Three Marines had managed to get within five meters, their weapons leveled straight at him.

The red-haired soldier in charge lowered his weapon and his two comrades followed suit. "Friendlies," he said quietly.

Leva managed to hide his relief when he realized they had not been ambushed by the enemy and lowered his weapon. "Where the hell have you been?" he growled, mostly to mask his anxiety. He glanced at D'Karr who had not reacted to the Marines' arrival, apparently having already anticipated them.

"Good to see you, too."

Leva turned to see Major Wasco and his Vulcan staff sergeant approaching. He gestured to his men. "Secure this position and stand by for further orders."

The three Marines acknowledged with curt nods and rapidly redeployed.

"Are you and your men all right?" said Leva, trying to deflect from his previously sharp tone.

"No casualties to Alpha or Charlie teams," Wasco said curtly. "I haven't seen or heard from Bravo since we split up."

Leva nodded slowly. "We were separated during an enemy engagement. Corporal Adenji didn't survive."

Wasco acknowledged the report matter-of-factly and then turned to the Klingon. "Shinsky informed me of the disagreement you had with him?"

"What happened?" Leva said.

When the Klingon didn't reply Wasco did so for him. "Apparently they couldn't decide which way to take and so Mister D'Karr here took off by himself," he looked back at the Klingon, apparent anger now flaring up in his eyes. "You had specific orders, Lieutenant. I expected you to follow them."

"Your men are able warriors but lousy pathfinders," D'Karr growled.

That had not been the answer Wasco had wanted to hear but Leva interceded before he could retort. "Reprimands can wait. We need to figure out what to do about that Jem'Hadar unit down there," he said calmly.

Wasco shot Leva a surprised look, clearly not having anticipated him to defend D'Karr. Wasco nodded. "We do not have the numbers to take

them on directly. But whatever they are doing must be related to why we are here."

Both Leva and D'Karr seemed to agree with that assessment.

D'Karr turned his back to the two men. "We might not be able to survive a frontal attack but what if we could even the odds a bit?"

"What do you have in mind?" Leva said.

D'Karr turned back to face him, a predatory grin on his face.

\* \* \*

Jana Tren was rummaging through the contents of a medical drawer to find a sedative that would relieve her of the burning pain in her wounded arm when Owens entered the infirmary.

"Take a seat," he said sternly, pointing at one of the two empty bio-beds in the small medical facility.

She shot him a glare that quickly gave way to a playful smile. "Yes, doctor," she said and hopped onto the bio-bed.

Owens walked over to one of the cabinets to find the necessary tools to mend her injuries. "It's been a while since I've had my first aid training," he said as he picked up the dermal regenerator and a mild muscle relaxant. "But I'll try not to make this hurt," he added, turning back toward her. "Much."

But Tren's facial expression had become much more thoughtful now. "Do you think she's a changeling?"

"I'm not sure," he said and approached her. "All I know for certain is that there is a shapeshifter on this outpost and he, it, has infiltrated Epsilon Twelve long before we ever came here. It's the only explanation that makes sense."

She shook her head in disbelief. "He was right under our nose and we didn't notice. It's unforgivable."

Owens could sense that she was all too ready to take full responsibility for this breach. "You can't blame yourself, Jan. These changelings have fooled all of us on plenty of occasions. One of them lead the entire Klingon Empire into an unfounded war."

She uttered a sarcastic laugh. "As if the Klingons need a reason to go to war."

"If Monroe is the changeling we'll find out. Try not to worry about it for now and let me take care of you," he said, lifting the medical tools to stress his point.

She nodded and tried to relax.

"Take off your shirt."

She looked at him with an incredulous expression on her face.

"I need to take care of that wound," he said innocently.

"Of course," she said sarcastically but then quickly lowered the zipper of her top. "I'm starting to realize why you've insisted on treating me."

"I find your implications utterly inappropriate," he said and became very preoccupied with his instruments when Tren finally discarded her shirt, leaving her clad in just a halter-top. He applied the relaxant to her

upper arm before removing the improvised bandage and cleaning the wound.

Jana looked right into his eyes while he worked on her, a small smile formed on her face when she noticed that he made every effort not to look at her.

The procedure took less than a minute. The dermal regenerator quickly mended the broken flesh and skin; soon nothing remained but dried blood.

"There, good as new," he said and turned to dispose of the instruments. He froze when he felt her hand holding him back. When he looked up to meet her eyes, he was surprised to find they had become watery. "Jana, what is it?"

"I ... I don't know, it's just ..."

Even though she didn't finish her sentence, it became increasingly obvious to him that she was suffering. She was sending out a mixture of emotions, some so strong that even he, as a non-telepath, was beginning to be affected by them. For the first time, Owens realized the pressure she had been under over the last few hours. Probably even longer. She was in charge—as far as he knew—of the most powerful weapons project ever conceived by the Federation and now it was quickly becoming its greatest failure as well as its greatest threat. She had seen people killed and die in front of her and now she had marooned them deep inside a planet with seemingly no hope of escape. She was no longer able to hold back the desperation she felt, the tears now flowing freely down her cheeks.

He hugged her tightly. It was inappropriate perhaps but he didn't care. He wanted to be there for her and he would start right now. She welcomed the embrace and rested her head on his shoulders, clearly enjoying the once-familiar feel of his body.

"We're going to get through this, Jan. I know we will," he said with as much confidence as he could muster. It wasn't nearly as much as he had hoped.

"You're a good liar," she said, wiping away her tears.

He didn't reply. There was little point to try and mislead a Betazoid. It had always made their relationship more challenging.

"Do you remember when you asked me if I was married?" she said, her head still on his shoulders.

Owens didn't quite know how to answer the question. Of course, he remembered. But did he really want an answer? Now of all times?

"The truth is," she said, "I was very close. There was a man in my life. I loved him. Or at least I thought I did. He was somebody I worked with very closely."

"What happened?"

She dried her tears on his shirt before continuing. "He was in charge of the security detail to protect Archangel," she said and swallowed. "He was on that transport ship with the rest of his people."

"I'm sorry."

Tren freed herself gently from him. "You want to know the irony of all this? He never even wanted the job in the first place. I convinced him to take it. I killed him, Michael."

"You don't know he's dead."

She shook her head. "I know he is. I can feel it."

He understood. If anyone else had made such a claim, he would have disregarded it as a sentimental illusion but with Betazoids it was different.

Some could establish powerful and real telepathic connections to those they cared for greatly.

She turned away. "Even worse, I don't think I ever loved him the way he loved me. He only agreed to take the job to be close to me."

"I don't blame him."

She turned to face him. "Do you really still love me, Mike?"

He nodded firmly and without hesitation. "I do."

She didn't hesitate either when she forced her lips onto his, kissing him passionately. He eagerly took everything she gave him.

She laughed when they separated again. It was a bittersweet sound. "I guess I have a thing about picking doomed men, don't you think?"

He shrugged. "We're in this together," he said, "why not make the best of it while we still can?"

"That reminds me. There was something we started, back on your ship, we never got the chance to finish it." A playful smile appeared on her lips as her fingers brushed through his hair.

"Do you really think this is the right place or time for this?"

"It might be the only place and time we've got," she said as she moved closer. "Don't worry, this room is soundproof," she whispered in his ear.

\* \* \*

The assembled Jem'Hadar forces had not been expecting an attack, so it caught them mostly unprepared.

Three fell even before they could return fire. After that, the remaining Dominion soldiers jumped into battle mode just like they had been born to do. They unleashed a carpet of deadly phased polaron discharges aimed at their attackers hidden within the maze-like tunnel system.

Their mistake had been to assume their enemy was positioned in only one location. Within moments the Jem'Hadar found themselves under fire from four different directions, each new attack forcing them to quickly re-shift their positions, costing them dearly each time.

The commander of the Dominion forces soon realized that their position was untenable, leaving them wide open to attack from all sides. There was only one valid tactical response. Overwhelm the enemy with superior numbers.

The commands were given quickly and precisely and with little hesitation the large group of Jem'Hadar soldiers splintered off to rush the enemy.

“Fall back, fall back,” ordered the man in charge of the attack force when he noticed the Jem'Hadar’s plan.

The attacking force hastily withdrew deeper into the mines to put some distance to the approaching wave of relentless killing machines, fully aware that they were outnumbered and outgunned. However, if they hoped to escape the Jem'Hadar, their ferocious persistence quickly crushed it. The Jem'Hadar had tasted blood and nothing but the destruction of their enemy would stop them now.

Leva peaked out from behind a large, mobile drilling platform where he had sought cover. He had not liked the plan, and now that he could spot the five Jem'Hadar soldiers left behind, he was even less enthused.

Still, he was determined to go through with it. He understood that it was the best chance they had.

He silently aimed at one of the soldiers and squeezed the trigger of his type-two phaser. The orange-red beam hit him square in the chest and he collapsed immediately.

Before his comrades could react, Leva left his cover and opened fire at the four Jem'Hadar who were bringing up their weapons to target him.

Running across the large chamber threw Leva's aim off and he managed to connect with only one more Jem'Hadar, grazing his shoulder. The bulky soldier didn't even seem to notice.

Leva leaped toward the safety of a large mining cart just as the Jem'Hadar were returning fire. He landed in the dirt and behind the sturdy metal cart, suddenly very much relieved that all his body parts were still attached to him. The cart shuddered and shook dangerously under the force of the incoming fire and Leva doubted it would be able to provide cover for long.

A roar filled the chamber and just like that Leva was no longer the primary target. When he spied out from behind his cover he realized why.

The Jem'Hadar had turned to the source of the battle cry coming from above. Leva could hardly believe it. D'Karr was sailing through the air, apparently having jumped off from the ledge far above and was flying straight toward the four standing Jem'Hadar soldiers. He held his large *bat'luth* sword in front of him like a shield, seemingly unperturbed by the ground racing to greet him.

The Dominion fighters did not have time to aim or for that matter to move out of the way. D'Karr smashed into three of them, knocking them all to the ground.

Seeing his chance, Leva came out from behind the cart and instantly took out the fourth Jem'Hadar who had been lucky enough to be missed by the flying Klingon.

Two of the Jem'Hadar had been fatally struck by the *bat'luth* sword pretty much on impact. D'Karr was taking no time to inspect his handy work. Instead, he was back on his feet roughly at the same time the final Jem'Hadar had recovered from the surprise attack. Both were covered in blood from injuries sustained from the collision. D'Karr did not seem concerned about them. Seizing the initiate, he head-butted his opponent and swung his *bat'luth* back and forth, seemingly playing for a dramatic finish. By the time the Jem'Hadar went for his rifle, it was already too late. D'Karr brought his sword down with all his might, the razor-sharp blade nearly cutting the man in two.

The battle was over.

D'Karr took a deep breath, looking over his fallen enemies as if expecting them to congratulate him on his victory.

"Nice work," Leva said as he walked past him, barely acknowledging his presence. He continued to the far wall where the Jem'Hadar had been working on a mysterious device.

D'Karr looked up. "Nice work? This was a battle worth of song and celebration. Stories of this day shall be told until the end of days."

"There won't be any stories to tell if we don't make it out of here," Leva said as he investigated the device. "And we won't if that Jem'Hadar unit returns."

D'Karr raised his blood-covered sword, looking into the direction the main part of the Dominion forces had rushed off to. "Let them come," he said, baring his teeth in apparent anticipation.

Leva just shook his head and decided to focus on the machinery in front of him instead. It was not much more than a shoebox-sized, rectangular device attached directly to the wall at eye level. The display showed text and what he guessed to be numbers in a language he could not read. Of greater concern were the large barrel-like canisters lined up against the wall, each connected by thin wires to the display device.

"What is it?" said D'Karr after Leva had fallen quiet to study what he had found.

"Explosives, I think," he said. "A lot of them."

"They're trying to blow through the wall."

Leva nodded. "Yes."

"Then we too want to get through this wall."

Leva was in agreement. But he could make neither heads nor tails out of what was quite obviously the detonator.

As he tried to figure out how the device worked, D'Karr whipped his head around, looking off into the distance. Judging by his growing smile, the enemy was returning.

Leva had seen detonators before and most of them worked in the same general manner. He was well-versed with most weapon designs and knew he just needed the right combination to take control of the device. He ventured an attempt by entering a simple mathematical sequence into the input field of the detonator.

The result was not what he had expected. He took a small step back when the display turned a bright red. The numbers and digits were beginning to change at an ever-increasing rate.

"Run," he said quietly.

"Klingons do not run from their enemies," D'Karr said, keeping his eyes focused on the tunnel where he expected the Jem'Hadar to emerge from.

"This time," Leva said, "you might want to make an exception."

D'Karr looked at Leva's blank expression and then at the rapidly changing display. The device had started to make a whining noise, gaining intensity by the second.

"Run," Leva shouted again, taking his own advice.

\* \* \*

She had protested vigorously but in the end, Shelby Monroe had been given no choice but to sit in a specially modified chair with her arms and legs restrained to keep her from escaping.

Nora had pointed out that it wouldn't be difficult for a shapeshifter to get out of that chair but with no other alternative present, she had made sure to stay at her side with her phaser rifle pointed straight at her head.

In the meantime, Santesh-Yardo and two of his assistants had prepared the anti-changeling serum and were going through last-minute adjustments to the formula. "The standard dose," Santesh-Yardo said, "is eight ccs. That amount should ensure that the changeling will no longer be able to maintain any solid form and retract to a semi-liquid state. But I need to point out that if this dose is applied to a humanoid, it will most likely be terminal."

"Are you willing to risk killing me, Lieutenant?" Monroe said through clenched teeth, glaring at Nora. "What if you're wrong?"

"I'll take that chance," she said coldly and looked at the scientist. "Do it."

Monroe quickly shook her head. "You can't possibly make that call."

Nora put the muzzle of her rifle closer to Monroe's head. "Somebody please shut this thing up already or I swear I will."

"She has a point, Laas," Deen said softly. "It's the captain's decision." She had observed the icy interchange between Monroe and Nora in silence ever since their rather public spat had begun. She knew Nora was not as heartless as she led on but also understood that she needed satisfaction for the death of Gene Edison. Obviously, this was not the means to achieve this. Nora seemed to have no other way to deal with her incredible anger and frustration and even Deen had to admit that the suspicion that Monroe was the same shapeshifter that had killed the first officer was not implausible. At the same time, she could not ignore the possibility that she was indeed who she claimed she was.

Nora had not wanted to hear this and looked at the younger woman as if she had been betrayed. The same cold eyes she had reserved for Monroe now shot holes into the Tenarian. "The captain made it quite clear what he wanted to be done. And we will execute his wishes."

Santesh-Yardo seemed torn. He looked at the three women before him, not sure if to administer the deadly hypo-spray he now held or not.

"Doctor," Xylion said. "I believe the active ingredient in your vaccine is zellizine."

Santesh nodded. "That is correct."

"If you were to apply a lower dose and compensate with trilizerine you should be able to achieve similar effects."

"I suppose that could work," Santesh said, after giving the suggestion a moment of thought. "Theoretically, the changeling would still have to change form after being injected with the amended mixture."

"And what if I'm not a changeling?" Monroe said.

Santesh-Yardo avoided looking at her directly when he spoke. "It would not be deadly but probably quite painful. Trilizerine will increase the temperature of the human bloodstream by a significant measure."

Deen looked skeptical. "Is there no other alternative?"

"We could stand here for days and debate the most humane way of testing this changeling," Nora said with dwindling patience. "Let's just get this over with."

"I concur," Xylion said. As the highest-ranking officer present, he felt confident in issuing the order to proceed. It was also quite logical. The captain had indicated that he wanted them to go through with the procedure. If Shelby Monroe was a shapeshifter they would find out as soon as she was unable to maintain her form. If she was not, she would experience pain but would still be alive. Under normal circumstances, Xylion may have objected to this treatment but these were not normal circumstances. "Doctor, please apply the low dosage compound."

"Very well," he said and turned to his assistants to hand back the hypo-spray. "Adjust the formula to a dose containing four ccs zellizine and four ccs trilizerine."

As they went to work, Nora moved closer to Monroe to whisper in her ear. "Try to hold out as much as you can but I promise you, the second your pretty face starts morphing, I'll blow it right off your fake shoulders."

Monroe locked eyes with her. "Enjoy this as long as you can, Nora. Once we're through with this, the only uniform you'll ever wear again is a prison jumpsuit."

Nora's rebuttal was cut short by a hand on her upper arm. It was Deen's. Nora stood and took a few steps away from Monroe, although she kept her rifle pointed in her direction.

"Laas, aren't you taking this a bit too personal? I know what this changeling has done but even so—"

"I appreciate your concern, Dee," she said, cutting her off. "But I know what I'm doing. It's my responsibility to ensure our safety and we're all at risk as long as this thing is alive."

"I understand that," she said. "But what if she's not a changeling?"

"This is war, Dee. Sacrifices have to be made. You think I like this? You think I like that so many have suffered and ... died."

"Laas?"

She didn't speak for a moment as she kept her glance firmly on Monroe who seemed to brace herself for what she knew was coming. Deen wasn't sure what Nora was thinking. Was she perhaps developing second thoughts about this? Was her conscience forcing her to reconsider?

"We're ready," said Doctor Santesh-Yado and presented a new hypo.

Nora looked back at Deen. "Stand back and let me do my job," she said and then approached Monroe again. "Get started."

Santesh-Yardo nodded and carefully closed in on Monroe. "I just want to reiterate that this is all purely theoretical," he said to nobody in particular. "We cannot be completely certain what we'll be seeing."

"I'll be ready for anything," Nora said and indicated to Ensign McAllister and another armed officer to keep their weapons on Monroe.

The conceivably fake Starfleet commander firmly bit down on her teeth when the hypo-spray made contact with her neck and its content was injected into her bloodstream.

Santesh-Yardo moved back swiftly as if he had just unleashed a wild and deadly animal.

All eyes in the room now rested on what may or may not have been Lieutenant Commander Shelby Monroe. Everybody expected a definitive answer to their dilemma to be delivered within the next few moments.

Still chained to the chair, Monroe began to squirm slightly, causing Nora to grip her rifle tighter.

Her skin started to glister but Nora couldn't be sure if it was caused by perspiration or because her body was getting ready to morph into another form. Then Monroe gripped the armrests with such force, her knuckles were being drained of color.

"Damn you! Damn you all!" she screamed as her pupils grew wide. She was trying to free herself from the chair but the restraints would not give way.

"Don't fight it," Nora said. "You're only prolonging the inevitable."

Monroe whipped her head toward Nora. "I'm going to rip out your throat," she yelled and then screamed in pain.

Deen winced at the sight and turned to look at Xylion to look for some sympathy. But the Vulcan showed nothing but scientific curiosity. The same was true for Santesh Yardo, even though the researcher made sure he kept a respectable distance from his test subject.

Some others began to turn away from the scene as Monroe's face twisted into a grimace of pain and agony. Nora watched on with fascination, perhaps even enjoyment.

Monroe caught a glance of Nora's vicious smile. "You are no better than the Cardassians, you know that?" she managed to say between painfully labored breaths. "You take pleasure from senseless torture just like they did when they raped your planet bare."

The smile dropped off her face and she stepped closer, ignoring the implications of being so near to a possible changeling. "Doctor!" she shouted with anger. "Increase that dosage, now."

Santesh-Yardo was already picking up another hypo when Deen stepped in front of Monroe to stop them from proceeding. "This is madness, you have to stop it."

"Get out of the way, Dee."

But she didn't budge. She looked at Xylion. "Commander, how much longer are we going to keep this up?"

"Doctor, should we not be able to see results by now?" Xylion said.

Santesh-Yardo shook his head. "I warned you that this formula is still experimental. The changeling might be able to adapt to it better than we anticipated. Especially on a lower dosage."

Nora had enough. She pushed Deen harshly out of the way. "It's obviously trying to hold out. Give her another shot."

Deen had not expected such force from Nora and was nearly thrown to the floor. She quickly recovered.

A high-pitched scream of pain echoed through the large chamber. Monroe's body was now completely covered in a film of what appeared to be sweat, her damp hair plastered to her head.

"Please stop this. She's dying," Deen said.

Xylion stepped closer, methodically scanning Monroe's body for any sign that she was not a humanoid being.

Nora swiftly stepped up to Santesh-Yardo and snatched the hypo from his hand. "Give me that," she said and approached the screaming woman again, aiming the injector at her neck.

"Don't. Do. That," Monroe croaked, hardly managing to get the words past her lips. "Kill. You."

"Why don't you try?" Nora shot back, taunting her, wishing for her to make a move.

"Lieutenant," Xylion began before she could apply the hypo-spray, "there appears to be no evidence to suggest that Lieutenant Commander Monroe is a changeling. You must not endanger her life any further."

"Are you blind?" she yelled at him. "It's about to crack." She raised the hypo to Monroe's throat fully intending to pump it into Monroe and for once and for all reveal her for what she truly was.

She never got the chance.

## XVII – DELIVERANCE

It had been nothing less than unbearable to sit by quietly while his fellow officer and friend had engaged in an attack that would cost her her life.

Perhaps it would have been easier, perhaps it would have made a difference, if it hadn't been Srena he had to watch sacrificing herself. He had become quite fond of the young woman perhaps because she reminded him so much of himself when he had begun his career. She had that same zest, that same high spirit, and even the cockiness that had defined himself not so long ago.

He could not stomach to sit idly by while she would throw away her life just because she happened to be in the less damaged shuttle.

With a sudden urgency and dedication Culsten hadn't thought possible, he had started to revisit the damaged components of his own vessel to find a way, any way, to get the shuttle moving again.

He was reminded of the old human adage that necessity was the mother of invention when a solution presented itself. Diverting all of what little power remained, including life support, he managed to fire up his starboard impulse engine, and soon after he was limping off to follow Srena's kamikaze run.

The speed he managed to coax out of the battered engines was nowhere fast enough to catch up with Srena's super-accelerated Raptor.

Her ship was seconds away from impacting with the Jem'Hadar attack fighter and there was nothing more he could do about it. His eyes were so focused on the sight of the impending disaster that he didn't even notice the proximity alert on his flight console.

Only after a large shadow fell over his shuttle, momentarily plunging his cockpit into darkness, did he realize they were no longer alone. He ducked instinctively when the large shape shot past him overhead at very close range. It was too close to make out clearly at first. Only once the ship had gained some distance again, did he recognize the shape. It was long and sleek with telling blue-colored and down-ward sweeping warp nacelles.

It was a Starfleet ship and he instantly knew which one. He had fought at her side before. Now the majestic *Akira*-class vessel raced towards the Jem'Hadar ship like an arrow, beginning to blast it with its phasers and torpedoes.

The enemy ship didn't stand a chance even as it tried desperately to roll away from the incoming onslaught with little success.

Culsten's eyes remained fixed on the speck of a ship that was still on a collision course with the Jem'Hadar fighter. "Come on, Srena," he said. "Back off."

But the small Raptor refused to comply with his bidding. He didn't know why but he could imagine multiple possibilities. Srena might have engaged the autopilot or perhaps her equally damaged craft was now refusing her commands.

Culsten slammed his fist down on his console, not able to bear the idea of the Andorian pilot losing her life for nothing and at the moment it appeared that was exactly what was going to happen.

The *Agamemnon* was fast but with only heartbeats separating Srena's shuttle and the Jem'Hadar ship, it was not fast enough to avoid the catastrophe that was to ensue.

Then a blue energy beam shot out from the newly arrived Starfleet ship, reaching out for the kamikaze Raptor. It grappled the vessel tightly

and pulled it away from its target. With the shuttle losing speed and momentum, *Agamemnon* flew past Raptor-Two and closed in for the kill.

And then, just like that, it was all over. The Jem'Hadar fighter broke apart under the concentrated firepower of the Starfleet ship and ceased to be a threat to anyone. *Agamemnon* released the tractor beam, holding the small shuttle, and turned to approach the battered *Eagle*.

A massive gasp of relief escaped his lips as he fell back into the pilot's chair. Only now did he realize that his heart had been pounding so fast, it had hurt his chest. It had finally slowed and for the first time in a few hours, he allowed himself to relax as he slowly steered the shuttle toward the two starships now waiting for him.

\* \* \*

A powerful shockwave had flattened Nora and everyone around her almost instantly.

She had been expecting some move from Monroe ever since she had realized that she was a changeling, she had, however, not anticipated an attack coming from an entirely different direction.

The massive explosion had ripped a large hole into one of the walls of the underground lab with such force and noise that nobody in the main hall had managed to remain on their feet.

Dust and debris had almost completely filled the chamber but fortunately, nobody had stood near the exploded wall segment.

Owens and Tren were first on the scene, rushing out from the adjacent infirmary with rifles at the ready. They froze when they noticed

the huge hole that now interrupted the formerly smooth white wall. It was all too obvious what it meant. The Jem'Hadar had found a way in. And both Owens was well aware that they were in no condition to offer much resistance.

Ensign McAllister stumbled back onto his feet before the others. Still dazed he looked at the destroyed wall but could see little through the dense red dust. He found the officers around him all stunned but uninjured. When he spotted the captain and Tren he looked at them for guidance.

"Get ready to defend yourselves," said Owens and brought up his phaser rifle. "Find cover, now."

McAllister nodded, and helped two others back onto their feet before scrambling for the nearest console to get out of the open where he presented an easy target. He was followed by most of the other armed officers.

The scientists who didn't possess weapons were swiftly rushed out of the chamber by Deen and Xylion.

When Nora got onto her feet she did not dart away like the others. She remained firmly in place, calmly surveying her surroundings. The first thing she noticed was not the fact that the chamber had been breached but that Shelby Monroe was gone. The chair had fallen over but was empty. She had a good idea of how she had managed to free herself from the restraints.

"Laas, get down."

Nora turned to see Owens crouched behind a bank of computer stations, his rifle pointed at the opening at the other side. Looking at the hole, she instantly recognized figures beginning to take shape.

She didn't hesitate again and firmly gripped her phaser rifle and charged.

"What is she thinking?" said Tren, who had taken a knee next to Owens, with bewilderment.

"She's not. Not anymore," he said as he watched his chief of security rushing the enemy head-on. He could not open fire with her in the way.

Nora had a clear line of fire and did not wait for the enemy to come to her. She blasted away even while charging ahead. The first figure dropped instantly. She was already so close, she didn't even bother using her phaser for her second target. She used the butt of her phaser like a bat, and aimed it squarely at his head.

The impact was so forceful that the rifle stock deformed slightly but not after shattering the Jem'Hadar's skull.

Only then did she realize that she had not thought her strategy through, finding herself surrounded by enemy soldiers, some quickly recognizing her as the enemy despite the still-settling dust.

She managed to take out another one by smashing her elbow into his face but then found herself with nowhere to go and an increasing number of Jem'Hadar bearing down on her. She didn't know what had come over her. She had violated the most basic rule of combat, giving up any kind of fortified position to meet the enemy alone and with no strategic advantage in the open. It was without doubt the most foolish decision she had ever made and it was going to cost her nothing less than her life.

She had resigned herself to this fate when she charged the nearest pair of Jem'Hadar, practically throwing herself at them. If she was lucky, she thought, she was going to be able to take them down but after that, she would make an easy target for whoever decided to point his weapon at her.

Owens had lost eye contact with Nora. She had become a blur inside the dust, indistinguishable from the enemy. For a fleeting moment, he had considered to take the few remaining men he had and to follow her. He had dismissed it quickly. He would not sacrifice all that was left because she had thought it a good idea to rush the enemy head-on.

Then, the first Jem'Hadar fighters emerged from the cloud of dust, roaring as they swarmed into the chamber.

Owens squeezed the trigger of his weapon, fully aware that any shots that missed could potentially end up hitting Nora. He saw no other choice. She might have bought them a few seconds but now it was about the survival of the Federation. If sacrifices had to be made then so be it.

The others in the lab joined in, firing madly at the approaching enemy. The Jem'Hadar returned fire but Owens could quickly tell that their assault seemed to lack coordination. They landed a few hits but it became quickly apparent that they did not have the numbers to take the chamber by force.

And although he could see a few of his own fall, the battle was far more lopsided than he had expected. No more than half a dozen enemy fighters had pushed into the main lab, and within a couple of minutes, each one had been cut down.

They had seemingly and impossibly held their position.

\* \* \*

Nora's body ached horribly. With her earlier wounds having had no time to heal, they were now punishing her for the disregard she had shown her

body, and she was bleeding freely from multiple cuts and deep scratches all over her body.

She didn't care about any of that.

She was just angry

Right in the middle of the dust cloud that refused to settle, there were no more enemies to fight. A few of them had rushed by her to get into the lab, perhaps not even noticing her at all. The few she had slain now lay by her feet.

She wanted more.

More Jem'Hadar to kill to make her feel more.

More pain, more anger, more everything.

"Is that it? Is that all you've got?" she shouted at nobody. "I'm still standing."

She got her wish. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted sudden movement and she knew it was coming her way. Fast. Even while she turned to face the Jem'Hadar, in the back of her mind she knew that her luck was about to run out. She raised her fists—she had lost her weapons earlier—to take him on mano-a-mano. She spotted the gleaming metal of a polearm blade aimed at her midsection. It was too late to formulate a proper counter-attack. She didn't have to.

Another body shot out from somewhere unseen, grabbed the Jem'Hadar, and dragged him to the ground before he could reach Nora.

A struggle ensued where both of them landed. Then a quick phaser burst ended all movement.

It was only then that the dust had finally given way enough to allow her to make out her surroundings more clearly. The Jem'Hadar who had

attacked her now lay motionless on the ground, dead. A Klingon on top of him was already building himself up again. He frowned.

Above both of them stood So'Dan Leva, his arm outstretched and holding a standard phaser that was still pointed at the lifeless body of the Dominion soldier.

"There was no need for that," D'Karr said as he returned to his feet. "I was about to break his neck," he added with almost childish disappointment.

Leva tugged away the weapon and shrugged. "Don't thank me then," he said and glanced at Nora, his face lighting up. "Are you okay?"

She offered him an empty look. She had not expected this. Any of this. Not to find Leva or D'Karr, not to defeat the Jem'Hadar this easily, and certainly not to be still alive.

He approached her carefully. "Laas, it's all right," he said. "That's the last of them."

She looked around and realized his statement to be true. All the Jem'Hadar were dead. She could see Owens and the others back in the lab now coming out from behind cover. She, on the other hand, had pushed so far ahead, she found herself inside what looked like a mining chamber.

"For now," D'Karr said. "There are plenty more where these came from." A smile returned to his lips, already cherishing the thought of his next encounter with the enemy.

\* \* \*

Culsten was still feeling weak in the knees from the recent events when he set foot on *Eagle*'s bridge, and perhaps understandingly so. He was being taught the hard lessons of command at breakneck speed and he was no longer sure if he was going to manage to keep up. The things he had seen and done over the past few hours were very different from what he had imagined it would be like being in command.

Wenera nearly jumped out of the captain's chair when she spotted him enter. "Lif, thank the heavens, you're all right," she said and approached quickly with an expression of unmistakable relief.

"I'm fine, Doc. How are things here?" he said, surprising himself how calm he managed to sound.

She shook her head. "We've taken a lot of damage," she said and turned to look at Trinik at tactical. He had a few green streaks on his face evidence that he had been injured during the battle with the Jem'Hadar, probably by loose debris.

Stanmore also looked banged up but was diligently attending to his station.

"We have a lot of injured. At least thirty-five from initial reports. Three fatalities," she said.

He acknowledged her report with a short nod. He could see in her eyes that she wanted to leave and head for sickbay and help treat those who needed her care. That was after all where she belonged, not up here on the bridge, leading a starship into battle. But he now realized more than ever that in times of war, everybody had to be able to do everything, no matter how difficult or inconvenient.

"Sir, the *Agamemnon* is hailing us," said Trinik

He exchanged a quick look with the doctor. He wasn't surprised that their rescuer wanted to speak to them, of course, but he wasn't entirely sure how to handle this situation. How would Donners react to find him, a junior officer in command?

"On screen," he said finally.

The image of *Agamemnon*'s sleek lines was replaced by that of her captain. Amaya Donners sat comfortably in her chair, radiating confidence and yet somehow managing to look warm and unthreatening. Her expression tensed slightly when she noticed Culsten answering her call, not exactly who she had been expecting.

"*Eagle do you require assistance?*" she said after just a second of hesitation.

"You have provided us with all the help we needed, sir," he said. "And not a moment too soon. We are deeply in your debt."

Her full lips curled upwards. "*Consider us even,*" she said but her face quickly became more serious. "*Are you in command, Lieutenant?*"

Now it was Culsten who hesitated. It took him a moment to relocate his voice. "The command crew is stranded on the fourth planet on this system. We've been attempting to rescue them when we were ambushed by several Jem'Hadar fighters."

"I see," she said. "How many Jem'Hadar have you encountered in this system?"

"Four ships," Culsten said. "The one you destroyed was the last one," he said and then added. "I hope."

She seemed impressed. "You have done well under the circumstances."

He couldn't quite suppress a smile at the compliment but reigned it in quickly. The sacrifices had been high and he did not feel like celebrating. At least not until they had recovered the away team. "Thank you, sir, but our job is not done."

She nodded. "Quite right. We'll assist you in the rescue attempt of—"

When Donners cut herself off in mid-sentence, he exchanged a worried glance with Wenera. "Something wrong, sir?"

She raised a hand in his direction, seemingly distracted by some of her crewmembers. "*Stand by, Eagle,*" she said and left her chair, walking off screen.

"Sir," Stanmore said. "We have a sensor contact, two-seven-one mark four-five."

Culsten and Wenera stepped up to the operations officer to look over his shoulder.

"What is it?" she asked.

Stanmore shook his head. "We have taken significant damage to sensors. I can't get a clear signal."

"*Eagle, we're sending you our sensor feed now,*" said Donners, prompting all eyes on *Eagle's* bridge to dart back to the screen.

The image changed to show the crimson-hued planet that was Ligos IV and a small object that had appeared in close proximity. When the image was magnified it became painfully obvious that the object in the planets' orbit was not small by any measure. Quite the opposite was true.

"*It would appear that you've missed one,*" said Donners as the image zoomed in close enough to allow for more details to become visible. It was

beyond the shadow of a doubt a Jem'Hadar ship. But this one was nothing like the small nimble fighter *Eagle* had encountered previously.

"It's a Jem'Hadar battle cruiser," she added, keeping her voice surprisingly neutral. "Our sensors have detected it lifting off the planet's surface a few moments ago. It's heading our way."

Culsten stared at that monstrosity of a ship with disbelief, unable to speak. He had prayed that the worst was behind them. He had been wrong. His knowledge of the Jem'Hadar fleet was limited but he understood that *Eagle* would not be able to survive an attack by a vessel of that size. They had never encountered a Jem'Hadar battle cruiser before and even with a fully combat-ready *Agamemnon* at their side, their chances, he figured, were not encouraging.

Wenera managed to ask the most poignant question. "How long?"

"At their current speed, they'll be in weapons range in forty-three minutes. I suggest we withdraw immediately. What is the status of your warp drive?"

Her suggestion shook him out of his perplexed state. "Unavailable. With all due respect, sir," he said and could hardly believe his next words. "I do not want to leave Captain Owens and the others behind. There must be another option."

The *Agamemnon*'s skipper's face reappeared on the viewscreen and she regarded the young officer for a moment. "The only other option is to fight. But your ship is hardly in any condition for that scenario."

"Perhaps," he said, "you could spare some repair teams. In forty minutes we might be able to get some of our weapons and shields back online," he added in a tone much less firm than he had hoped. He had diverted his eyes from Donners but when he faced her once more he found her smiling.

"You have guts, I give you that," she said but continued with a sterner expression. "Are you certain that you want to put your ship and crew in harm's way like that?"

He considered that for a moment. She made a decent point except for one thing. "With all due respect, sir, we've been in harm's way the moment we've entered this system. And if we run, we'll be an easier target. I say we make our stand right here, right now," he said, this time managing to keep his voice firm.

She nodded. "I'll have repair teams sent over right away," she said and then leaned forward in her chair. "Lieutenant, I'll also be able to spare my first officer. He is a well-experienced combat officer."

He knew immediately what she was implying. He didn't answer right away. Instead, he glanced at Wenera. The responsibility over *Eagle* and all her crew was weighing so heavily on his shoulders, it was threatening to cripple him. And yet he couldn't shake the simple fact that it was his command. The captain had entrusted him with the safety of his ship and crew, and he wasn't sure if he could live with himself if he was to abandon it now, not after everything they had been through.

Wenera stepped up next to him. "Sir, I think I speak for the majority of the crew when I say that under the present circumstances, we could not wish for a better leader than Lieutenant Culsten. He has kept us alive this long and we trust him to see us through this to the end."

He couldn't avoid swallowing. He glanced around the bridge to see the all eyes on him now. And none of them showed the slightest hint of doubt.

They stood behind him; they trusted him.

"You seem to have inspired a great deal of confidence," Donners said. "But it's your decision to make, Lieutenant. I don't think anybody would think less of you if you were to step aside."

He locked eyes with her. "I will remain in command of this ship."

She nodded. "So be it. I will confer with you in twenty minutes concerning our plan of engagement. Standby to receive repair teams."

"I'll be ready."

"Good luck ... Captain," she said with a smile. "Agamemnon *out*."

With that, her face vanished from the screen.

He found her smile infectious. The situation both *Eagle* and Donners' ship were facing could potentially spell the end to all their lives, he realized that all too well. And yet he couldn't deny another fact. It had been the first time he had ever been called *captain* and he liked the sound of it.

He knew they didn't have much time and he quickly turned to Wenera. "This might become ugly," he said.

"Become ugly?" she said. "Feels like we've already passed that line."

"Yeah," he said. "But perhaps you should return to sickbay and prepare for more wounded."

"You sure you'll make do without me?" she said with a little grin.

"I'll manage somehow."

She nodded and turned to leave.

"Doc?"

She stopped, looking back at him.

"Thanks."

She approached him again and put a hand on his upper arm. "You'll get us through this, Lif. I know you will. Just focus on doing your job and letting everyone else do theirs."

\* \* \*

The end had not come.

Not yet.

They had been spared one more time but Owens was certain that their miracles were running out fast. A notion that was confirmed when So'Dan Leva and Lieutenant D'Karr had informed him that anywhere between forty and a hundred additional Jem'Hadar were still located throughout the mine. The plan had been for the Marines to distract them long enough for the two of them to try and gain access to the outpost, which they had achieved through rather unorthodox and unexpected means. As to what the fate of the Marines had been, they did not know.

It did not go unnoticed by Owens that Leva and D'Karr had worked hand-in-hand to come to their rescue and defeat the Jem'Hadar who had attempted to storm the underground lab. It seemed they had overcome their previous issues or at least postponed them. Owens was relieved. If there was one thing he didn't need it was another conflict to deal with.

"What are our chances of getting to the surface through the mines?"  
Owens asked.

Leva looked around before responding, taking stock of the survivors who consisted of mostly frightened civilians and science personnel. "It's a

long way up and we're bound to run into the Jem'Hadar sooner or later. The tunnels are dark, steep, and narrow. If we try to get all these people through there, I foresee a bloodbath," he said quietly as not to unnecessarily startle the men and women he was speaking about.

"We can't stay here either," Tren said. "Eventually those Jem'Hadar you managed to distract will come back and we won't be in any position to defend this place now."

Owens considered her for a moment before his glance caught Archangel, still pulsating in a steady red light. It had escaped the attack seemingly unscathed and Owens thought he knew why. The Dominion wanted to ensure the device's survival as much as the Federation. And so they would keep fighting for it until the last man standing could lay claim over it and with it; victory. And not just on this remote world but on a much grander and terrifying stage.

He spotted Xylion taking account of the dead and wounded. "Commander, what's our status?"

"Two Starfleet crewmen and one civilian have been killed," he said promptly. "There are a total of nine Starfleet personnel and twenty-three civilians remaining."

"Injuries?"

"None of which are serious. However," he said and gestured to a nearby wall.

Owens looked in that direction and found Epsilon Twelve's first officer crouched on the floor, holding her right shoulder. He had not noticed her until now as she had clearly decided to keep a low profile after the treatment she had received earlier. She was in obvious pain. Owens couldn't tell if she had received her injuries during the attack.

"Lieutenant Commander Monroe appears to have been wounded," Xylon said after an uncharacteristically long pause.

"Commander?" Owens said, taking a step toward her. "How serious are your injuries?"

She raised her head very slowly, staring blankly at Owens but didn't speak.

He looked at his officers around him. "What happened to her?"

Deen simply shook her head.

"We have not been able to definitively establish if she is a changeling," Doctor Santesh-Yardo said. "Our tests were interrupted."

Owens looked at him with a quizzical expression. He knew instantly that he was holding something back. And it wasn't just him. Nobody seemed eager to completely shed light on the events that had transpired in his absence.

Nora had not spoken since the attack but now she looked straight at Owens, the fire returning to her eyes. "How could she have gotten out of those restraints?" she said and pointed at the chair Monroe had been tied to earlier. "She has to be."

Tren took a step toward Shelby Monroe but took care not to get too close. Everyone was keeping a respectable distance from the wounded woman. She was a mess. Her formally well-groomed hair had come loose and was hanging into her face which was wet and dirty from dust and perspiration and her uniform was untidy and torn in places. "She needs medical attention," she concluded.

Nora looked at her with utter astonishment.

Tren ignored the security officer and focused on Owens instead. She had lost the intensity that had defined her over the course of the last few days. Instead, she looked tired and exhausted herself. She also appeared to have gained a genuine concern for Monroe.

Owens nodded and faced the disheveled officer. "Commander, can you make it to the infirmary?"

She kept her empty eyes on him almost as if she could no longer understand what he was saying.

"I'll take her," Nora said with resignation in her voice. She had not given up on her conviction that Monroe was a changeling but she could sense that the others were beginning to doubt it and it was exactly that kind of thinking that would make her even more dangerous. She decided that she would keep her eyes on her no matter what. With her phaser pointed at Monroe she slowly approached. "Get up."

When Monroe didn't seem to react, Nora decided to pull her onto her feet.

"Get your damned hands off me," Monroe shouted and stood.

It had come so suddenly that even Nora had flinched. She took a small step back but instantly took aim with her weapon.

"I'm not going anywhere with that maniac," she said forcefully but kept her eyes on Owens, refusing to even look at Nora. "You want to shoot me? Go ahead and get it over with already."

"Nobody wants to shoot you," Tren said.

Monroe pierced the other woman with a dark glare before focusing back on Owens, apparently waiting for him to make up his mind.

He nodded slowly. "Very well," he said and looked around, finding Germaine McAllister. "Ensign, please escort the commander to the infirmary."

The young officer stepped forward but froze when Nora began to protest. "Sir, I'm not letting her out of my sight again," she said with a ferocity rivaling Monroe's. "If it wants to die," she added and looked back at Monroe, raising her rifle. "I'll be happy to oblige."

"Then what are you waiting for?" Monroe fired back. "I'd gladly die if it would send you to rot in a penal colony for the rest of your miserable life." Monroe stepped closer to Nora, now entirely unconcerned with the rifle still aimed at her chest.

"Lieutenant," Owens said sharply, barely reigning in his anger at her open display of such unwarranted aggression.

But neither Nora nor Monroe seemed to take notice of his tone. Instead, they simply looked at each other, like mortal enemies locked together against their will, waiting for the other to make the first move.

Owens had enough. He stepped up behind Nora, took hold of her shoulder, and pulled her away from Monroe. "Ensign, take Commander Monroe to the infirmary, now."

"Yes, sir," the young officer said and carefully stepped closer, indicating for Monroe to head toward the doors. He kept his distance and held his own rifle at the ready.

Monroe tore herself away from her nemesis and with determined steps walked out of the chamber, followed by McAllister.

Owens withdrew his hands from Nora but noticed that her eyes had remained fixed on Monroe until the very second she had disappeared.

They remained glued to the now-closed doors instead of paying attention to him. "Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

She nodded, absentmindedly, refusing to make eye contact. "Yes but I don't think we can trust—"

"No," he said, interrupting her. "Are you *all right*, Lieutenant?"

That caused her to finally turn and look at him, and find that his expression was not one of sympathy or concern. He was not interested in how she felt. He wanted her unquestionable compliance and nothing else. It had been the first time she had failed to provide it.

She said nothing.

"Laas," he finally said in a softer tone that was too quiet for anyone but her to pick up. "I know what you've been through today and believe me when I say that I wish for nothing more than for it all to be undone. But we both know that's not possible. So I will need you to hold together just a little while longer. Do you understand?"

She nodded, hesitantly and without uttering a word.

"Are you with me?" he said not willing to let it go yet.

"Yes, sir," she said, her voicing as firm as it usually did.

"Good. I want you, Leva, and D'Karr to take up position just outside the lab. Keep your eyes open for any more Jem'Hadar coming our way," he said and waited for her to set in motion.

He continued to watch as the three of them walked through the destroyed wall and into the adjacent mine.

Owens let a small sigh escape his lips and then rejoined Tren and Santesh-Yardo. Xylion, Hopkins, and Deen also stayed close. "We need a

plan to get out of here and we need it quickly," he said as if nothing was out of the ordinary.

"Our chances are bad no matter what we do," Tren said, also willing to forget the episode for now. "I don't see an easy way out of this."

Owens looked back at the large machine everybody was fighting for. "Perhaps there is a way to even the odds."

## XVIII – VENGEANCE

As ordered, Nora left the lab complex to take a forward position within the mine to keep a look out for Jem'Hadar forces everybody knew were still somewhere within the large mine preparing for another attack.

And yet she seemed far interested in observing the lab through the hole that had been ripped into the wall. She paid little attention to the heated argument that had erupted between Owens, Tren, and Santesh-Yardo.

Instead, her focus was on the closed doors that led to the infirmary and into which Shelby Monroe had disappeared into a short while earlier. She was anxiously awaiting her return, convinced that Monroe—the changeling—posed a far more serious threat to them than all the Jem'Hadar fighters ever could.

As far as she could tell, nobody was taking the matter seriously anymore. Most seemed more than willing to forget that their earlier tests had been inconclusive. Owens himself had been adamant on the issue, ordering her to back off and leaving Monroe in the care of a young and inexperienced junior officer.

Regardless of her orders, Nora had decided to remain vigilant, refusing to be fooled as easily as the others had been.

“Laas?”

With her thoughts so focused on the shapeshifter, she didn’t hear Leva calling out to her.

“Laas?” he said again as he stepped up next to her.

She turned to look at him.

The concern in his eyes was not easily missed. "What happened?"

"We were attacked," she said without giving the question any thought and turned back to observe the doors from a distance.

"I mean to Gene."

She barely acknowledged that the mention of his name made her feel uneasy. She hadn't thought much about what had happened to him, she had been too preoccupied with dealing with their current situation. She had told herself that she could not allow herself to be distracted. She could not let her guard down, not even for a second least that was the moment the enemy would strike again. "He was killed," she said, her eyes never leaving those doors.

He nodded slowly, unable to hide the sadness he felt over the loss. Even more, he felt ashamed when he remembered the last conversation he'd had with the first officer. He had acted foolishly and clearly disappointed him. But he was certain Nora had to feel much worse. He knew that they had felt for each other deeply even if they had tried to hide it. "It was the changeling, wasn't it?"

She didn't answer and he took that as confirmation.

"Losing a mate in battle is a challenge equal in measure to the challenge of battle itself."

D'Karr's statement promoted her to turn to him and look straight into his eyes.

"But you should rejoice in the knowledge that he will be waiting for you in the afterlife, prepared to be at your side once more when you are ready to join him."

Nora looked at him not sure how to reply to what he had said. She did not know how he knew about her relationship with Gene. And while

his words seemed to make sense to her, she did not fully appreciate his input on this matter. She had no desire to speak about any of this and so simply turned away once more.

"How long has she been gone?" she asked moments later.

"Who?" Leva said.

"It's been too long," Nora said, speaking to herself. "Her injuries were not that serious."

Leva and D'Karr exchanged a glance, unsure how to respond.

Nora took action before they could. "Cover for me," she said quickly and walked back toward the lab. "I'll be right back."

Leva wanted to protest but it was too late.

She made no special effort but managed to remain unseen by Owens when she stepped back into the laboratory and headed toward the doors leading to the infirmary.

Hopkins noticed. Her eyes opened wide and for a moment she considered letting Owens know what Nora was up to. But a stern look from Nora changed her mind and she decided to turn a blind eye instead.

Nora slipped through the doors and found a small hallway behind them. The ancillary facilities were not very extensive and she quickly located the entrance to the infirmary.

The room was separated into two sections, divided by a semi-transparent screen. Ensign McAllister greeted her in the entry area.

"Lieutenant?" he said, clearly surprised to see her.

"Where is Monroe?"

"She's in the ward," he said noticeable anxiety in his tone. "I gave her some privacy so she could treat her wounds. To be honest, I think she might have fallen asleep."

She couldn't believe her ears. "I'm surprised you didn't."

McAllister tried to regain some of his composure, clearly embarrassed.

She dismissed him with a wave of her hand and stepped up to the partition. The ward behind the screen consisted of two beds, one was occupied with Monroe. She lay quietly on her back, her eyes closed and a few used medical supplies nearby.

She could hardly believe that the woman had decided to take a nap. She raised her phaser rifle. "Monroe," she said loudly, approaching her carefully.

She did not react.

She wasn't going to take any chances. "Get up," she said loudly and when she still didn't get a response, she poked her with the emitter of her rifle.

"What's wrong?" said McAllister who had appeared by the partition.

She ignored him. "You're not fooling anyone," she said. "Get up now or I'll disintegrate you right here."

Only then did she realize that something was very wrong. Monroe's chest was perfectly still, she wasn't breathing. A changeling, of course, didn't need to breathe in the same manner as most humanoids but at the very least they would keep up pretenses.

She threw caution to the wind, lowered her rifle, and stepped up to the bed. Her fingers quickly darted for Monroe's neck but she was unable

to locate a pulse. Then she noticed that her throat was discolored. There were deep red marks across her neck. It didn't make sense to her. If she was a changeling, why was she pretending to be dead? To have been killed? What kind of trick was this?

She whipped around, seeing McAllister still standing behind her. He mirrored her confused expression. "She's dead."

"What?" But his state of confusion didn't last long.

Even while she began to level her rifle at him, she knew she was going to be too slow.

McAllister fired at her as she jumped to avoid the incoming blast. She was of course no match for the speed of a phaser beam. It slammed into her shoulder even as she tried to dive away. The impact pushed her backward. She ignored the stinging pain gripping her body and fought to hold on to her rifle. She managed to get behind the other biobed for cover just before McAllister could fire again and finish the job.

The blast vaporized the bed coverings but missed her by a hair's breadth.

"It was you," she shouted with boiling anger. Angry that she had been stupid enough to leave her so exposed. Angry that she had not suspected the young officer before. Angry that she had allowed him to shoot her but most of all, angry for what that thing had done to Gene.

McAllister uttered a strange sound that sounded only marginally like laughter as he changed position to get a better shot. "You solids are so predictably paranoid. I couldn't have hoped for a better course of events."

She listened carefully to his voice and when she thought she had located him, she peeked out from her cover and fired. The blast hit the

partition, shattering it but missed the McAllister shapeshifter. He returned fire instantly but she had quickly retreated again.

"You took on Monroe's form," she said, mostly in hopes of buying herself some time to figure out how to get out of this mess alive. "Xylion saw you."

"I took many forms," he said as he moved again. "The Bolian, the Vulcan, Monroe, this one. I have to admit, watching you torturing one of your own was both enlightening and entertaining," he continued, broken glass squishing under his feet.

She was gripped by blind rage as she came up firing again. For a moment she was certain she would hit the changeling but his entire body simply shifted out of the way as if it were made of living clay, bending and re-shaping in distinctly inhuman ways.

She dropped back behind cover, just in time to avoid his rebuttal. The phaser blasts were absorbed by a sturdy cabinet she had found as another cover to hide behind, scorching the surface but unable to penetrate it.

The changeling sighed, or at least that's what she thought it sounded like. "Your weapons are so primitive, so unreliable."

She heard him discard the rifle and she knew she was in trouble. She needed to move. She sat with her back against the cabinet, intently listening to the changeling's movement. There was a liquid sound as the shapeshifter changed its appearance. She tried to jump onto her feet but was stopped in her tracks. Her eyes opened wide when she felt a piercing pain shoot through her back.

She looked down to see the silver spike protruding out of her mid-section, covered in blood. Her blood.

"Monroe was right about one thing," it said with almost childish glee as it slightly twisted what looked like a solid steel tentacle it had impaled her with. "She'll get her revenge on you. Ironically, I'll be the one to deliver it."

It were D'Karr's last words that went through her mind when she grabbed that solid spike with both hands in a futile attempt to free herself.

Gene was waiting for her. She prayed the Klingon would remain right.

Nora Laas would know soon enough.

\* \* \*

*Eagle* and *Agamemnon*'s combined repair teams had accomplished miracles in the extremely short time that had been available to them. Even though working under immense pressure and on an entirely inflexible schedule, they had managed to bring the battered starship's shields back to half strength and both phasers and torpedo launchers were mostly fully operational again. There wasn't nearly enough time to mend the hull breaches, tend to the damaged impulse engines, or make the ship warp-capable again. In less than forty minutes *Eagle* had to swim or sink and that was all there was to it.

Culsten had spent most of that time in the observation room—he could have used the captain's ready room but thought it to be inappropriate—and carefully listened to Amaya Donners' plan of attack. He had spoken very little, leaving most of the details of the coming battle to the ranking officer, trying his best to appear professional and reliable in front of the captain of the *Agamemnon*. After she had laid out their plan of engagement and she had terminated the connection, he felt a wave of

anxiety come over him. Not entirely unexpected when going into battle against a superior enemy. But he had hoped that Donners would have revealed a daringly witty plan that would ensure easy victory over the Jem'Hadar dreadnought. Instead, their battle plan was rather straightforward forward with very few surprises that could shift the fight quickly in their favor.

His trepidations vanished the moment he stepped onto the bridge where he was greeted by a familiar face.

"Srena," he said with such euphoria, practically everyone turned to look at him. He didn't care.

The petite Andorian smiled at him as he approached.

He froze for a moment as he spotted those contrasting white teeth against her dark blue lips. Was it appropriate for him to be this welcoming to a person he had only just ordered to her death? Could he pretend it had never happened? He wasn't sure how he was supposed to treat her now.

"With your permission, I'd like to resume my station," she said before he could ponder the answers to his own questions. She was still smiling. "I hear you've got a big fight coming up. You'll need me."

He nodded slowly and Srena wordlessly relieved the noncom who was currently manning the helm. Culsten didn't miss the fact that she was limping slightly.

He almost casually moved to her side, looking down at her with a pained expression on his face.

She noticed. "Don't tell me you want to sit here instead."

"Shouldn't you be in sickbay? I'm sure you were shaken up quite a bit in that shuttle earlier."

Her expression hardened and she looked back at her station. She had obviously hoped to avoid the subject. "I'll be fine," she said. "It's just my leg and I don't need that to pilot a starship."

He suppressed the urge to chuckle. He had placed his hand on her headrest but now wanted to move it down onto her shoulder. He resisted that notion as well. When he spoke he did so with a voice not much louder than a whisper. "Listen, about earlier—"

She looked up at him before he could finish the thought. "You did what you had to, *sir*," she said emphasizing the title. "I know it couldn't have been easy for you to make that decision."

He nodded slowly before stopping himself. Was she truly able to be this rational about what had happened? Had she already processed the events that had nearly led to her death and was she more equipped to handle them than he was? Only then did he notice the tears swelling up in her bright white eyes. She was holding them back admiringly but refused to look back at him.

He knew it wouldn't look very professional but that didn't stop him from leaning down toward her. "I want you to see Trenira when all this is over. I think we both should," he said, referring to the ship's resident counselor.

She nodded slowly but didn't speak. Only once he had finally turned away, she added quietly: "If we're still around by then."

"Sir, the *Agamemnon* is hailing us," Trinik said, cutting off any attempt to reply to her gloomy remark.

"On screen," he said and faced forward.

Donners came on instantly, her face a stern mask of concentration. "It's time."

Culsten nodded. "We're ready."

"*Godspeed, Eagle,*" she said and cut the transmission.

He swallowed but thankfully nobody was watching him. The entire bridge crew was far too focused on their instruments to pay him any attention. They had to be or this battle would quite possibly be their very last.

"Helm, set course zero-two-seven mark one-seven-seven, engage at one-quarter impulse."

Srena acknowledged with a curt nod.

"Divert maximum power to forward shields, stand by all weapons."

"Forward shields at ninety-two percent," Trinik said. "Phaser arrays one and two, fully operational. Torpedo launcher two ready and loaded." One frontal launcher had been all the repair teams had been able to make available in the short time they had. It would have to do.

As *Eagle* turned toward Ligos IV and as the sight of the massive Jem'Hadar battleship came into view, he once again considered the flaws of Donners' plan. *Eagle* would take a serious beating in the battle that was to come. People would die. It was inevitable. But he couldn't really blame Agamemnon's captain for that. She had offered him an out after all. Two actually. He had refused both and in the end, this meant that he would be responsible for whatever happened next.

"Distance to target: One point two million kilometers and decreasing. We'll be entering weapons range in two minutes," Stanmore said with a voice that only slightly betrayed his growing anxiety. He had held fast at his position through three battles today. Three more than he had expected when he had gotten out of bed in the morning.

He sat in the captain's chair as he watched the battleship increase in size by the second. It was huge, easily three times the size of *Eagle* or *Agamemnon*. And the other Starfleet ship was not anywhere in sight. For now, it was a one-on-one with *Eagle* playing the role of the underdog.

"You know," Stanmore said, never taking his eyes off the screen. "It's not too late to turn around."

He had meant it in jest but nobody was laughing.

"Steady as she goes," he said with ironclad firmness in his voice. His eyes narrowed and his brow furled. As far as he was concerned, the only way was forward.

\* \* \*

"I thought you were opposed to the entire concept of Archangel," said Tren after Owens had explained his plan. "Didn't you equate it to genocide?"

"I don't condone the use of any weapon designed to wipe out an entire species of people but at the moment it is our only way out of here. And if I understood Doctor Santesh-Yardo correctly, we currently do not have enough power to make Archangel effective beyond a very limited range."

The Grazerite scientist nodded. "If fed by an appropriate power source Archangel is designed to carry electromagnetic waves over subspace and as far as thirty to fifty light-years."

Owens felt a cold shudder run up his spine as Santesh-Yardo explained the potential of this weapon.

"But don't have access to such a power source here," he said. "At the moment we can hope for about one percent of that range before the electromagnetic waves deteriorate."

"That is more than enough," Owens said. "We'll be getting rid of the Jem'Hadar in the mine, the whole planet even."

"This entire solar system," added Louise Hopkins quietly.

He considered her briefly. It was more information than what he had wanted to know. In his eyes, nobody should possess that kind of power even if it seemed rather convenient to solve their current dilemma.

*Is this how it starts?* He wondered. Was this how Jana, Santesh-Yardo, and all the others who had taken part in developing this doomsday weapon had thought at first? If you can destroy the enemy on the battlefield, why not all across the planet? Why not all over the system? Why not across the entire cosmos? Where do you stop and draw the line?

"As I said before," Santesh-Yardo said, seemingly unperturbed by the implications Owens was pondering. "Even if we get Archangel up and running, we're still having problems with the wave modulation. We know that it will target the Jem'Hadar genome but we cannot be certain that it will kill them right away."

"It will have a detrimental effect on them, that's for certain," Tren said. "The waves are designed to break down hydrogen bonds that hold their DNA together. They may not break down immediately, but fast enough that they won't be able to function for long after the initial exposure, as long as it remains constant enough. Given our situation, I think we're better off facing them severely debilitated."

There seemed to be general agreement on this part amongst everyone present.

“Sir?”

It was Xylion who was alerting Owens of the person approaching the group. It was Monroe. Her injuries were now healed but her uniform was still torn and dried blood and sweat hinted at the toll her body had suffered earlier. And yet she strode toward them with confidence, alone and unarmed. She ignored the stares as she stepped closer.

“Where is Ensign McAllister?” Owens said.

Instead of answering the question, she seized him up first as if she couldn’t believe the audacity of his question. “Believe it or not but he fell asleep in the medical bay. I guess the events of this damned day finally got to him. Would you like to go check on him?” she said in a brisk tone.

Owens was about to reply but she didn’t give him the chance. “With all due respect, Captain, I’m done with your accusations. You and your people have tested and tortured me with vicious intensity and found nothing to implicate me as a changeling. You don’t trust me? Fine. I don’t care. Like all of you, I just want to make it out of here alive. Of course, if I do, I’ll promise you that you’ll wish I hadn’t because I will brief Command on every single gruesome detail that has transpired here. I’m sure they’ll be very interested.”

Owens considered her for a moment. He did not know what exactly Nora had done to her but for now, he preferred to remain ignorant. One crisis at a time, he decided.

“Until then, *sir*, I am still a senior officer of this station and I ask—scratch that. I demand to be included in any plans you are about to make.”

He looked at Tren. She seemed more sympathetic to Monroe’s plight and slowly nodded her head.

"Very well, Commander," he said but with no intention of wasting precious time to fill her in on all the details. Instead, he faced the trio of technical and scientific experts: Santesh-Yardo, Xylion, and Hopkins. "Let's be very clear about this. I hate the very notion of activating this infernal machine but I see few alternatives. The question is how can we use it without it blowing up in our faces before it can do its job?"

"Essentially," Hopkins said slowly, sounding somewhat uncertain of herself, "we need a computer-controlled program that can automatically modulate for the unexpected fluctuations that will rip the machine apart once it begins to emit the electromagnetic waves."

"How long would that take?" Tren said.

"A team of skilled programmers would require approximately two days to design an AI syntax that could understand and react to all eventualities," said Xylion.

"Obviously, we do not have that kind of time," Owens said. "What is the other option?"

"Manual control," Xylion said.

Santesh-Yardo shook his head. "That will not work. Not for long. The required modulations would become so complex within a few minutes that no person could adjust the system manually quickly enough."

"If somebody would manually work the device," said Monroe, "would that person be able to keep it running long enough to build up the power necessary to destroy the Jem'Hadar and give the others a chance to escape?"

Owens looked at Monroe, surprised at her sudden question. He didn't like it but it was the right one to ask. He looked to Santesh-Yardo for the answer.

The scientist seemed reluctant to answer it. "It's possible if the operator knows what they're doing. But it'd be suicide. Archangel would rip apart the instance the modulations become too complex to handle, and destroy everything and everyone in a one-hundred-meter radius."

Nobody spoke. It had become apparent what had to be done. Only one question remained.

Owens decided to be the one to ask it. "Who here would be able to keep it running the longest?"

Silence ensued again. Owens was aware that he would have been the logical choice to stay behind. He was the ranking officer and therefore carried full responsibility for the people under his command. If Epsilon Twelve had been a starship, he would not have hesitated to take on that role. But he knew he was completely out of his element. He didn't know the first thing about how this machine worked. He would not be able to give the others a realistic chance to clear the mine before it destroyed itself and everything around it.

He considered Xylion. The Vulcan was a reasonable choice, he seemed to grasp the concept of how Archangel functioned and he had reflexes and abilities beyond those of most other races. Louise Hopkins was the most talented engineer in the group and had managed to perform miracles on plenty of occasions.

But there was one person who seemed to be more familiar with this doomsday device than anybody else present.

Santesh-Yardo could read Owens' thoughts like an open book. "It would have to be me."

\* \* \*

Obedience brings victory. That was the most essential mantra of the fighting forces of the Dominion. It had never failed, had never been proven wrong, and never had the Jem'Hadar questioned its indisputable truth. There had been exceptions. Rare stories, myths really, of Jem'Hadar units that had abandoned the Dominion, even turned on their leaders. But those were usually quickly explained away by reasonable-sounding explanations such as a defective patch of clones or unexpected shortages of the ketracel-white drug.

There appeared to be just one inherent flaw in the Jem'Hadar's well-proven battle cry. Obedience could only deliver victory if those who demanded it knew exactly what they were doing.

Wegnour did not and it was becoming quickly apparent that the situation was getting away from him.

"Why has unit four not responded," he shouted at a Jem'Hadar operating one of the consoles that had been put up in a hurry in the large cavern-turned-improvised command center.

Leaving behind the battlecruiser to send it after the Starfleet ships in the system was yet another decision First Telaka'clan had not agreed with. But just as it was customary for the Jem'Hadar, he had not questioned the order. "Communications are unreliable within the mine," he said, preempting an answer from the soldier Wegnour had focused his fury on. "We were able to maintain reliable communications from the ship but without we do not have access to the required resources."

The implication in his statement was obvious enough for the Vorta to redirect his anger at Telaka'clan. "I don't want excuses, I want results."

"Bring back the command vessel, engage all available units onto our main objective. Give me the tools I need and I *will* deliver results."

Wegnour stared at the Jem'Hadar with a mixture of disbelief and anger. Such defiance and candor were practically unheard of within the Dominion military. The fact that the Vorta did not immediately request the blunt-speaking Jem'Hadar terminated spoke of the desperation he felt.

They continued to glare at each other, Telaka'clan, calm as ever, waiting for the Vorta to make any kind of move while Wegnour seemingly stunned by the soldier's words was holding out for some form of explanation or perhaps even an apology.

Wegnour quickly realized that he would wait in vain and that the continued stand-off was making him look weak compared to the taller and stronger man who refused to stand down. The Vorta had never been more aware of the physical difference between them. It was uncomfortable, threatening even.

The Dominion ambassador sprang into action, turning away from 'Clan he faced another Jem'Hadar fighter. "Give me that," he said and reached out for the man's sidearm. The Jem'Hadar offered no resistance and Wegnour quickly pointed it straight at Telaka'clan's chest. The Jem Hadar First didn't flinch at the Vorta's disappointment.

"Is there any good reason why I shouldn't eliminate you on the spot?" he said his voice cracking up ever so slightly.

Ignoring the imminent danger to himself, Telaka'clan took a step closer to the Vorta. "Kill me now and this mission of yours is guaranteed to end in failure. There are no more qualified soldiers in my unit to lead. In the name of the Founders, I ask you —"

"Don't you dare justify your actions by inferring the name of the Founders, you insolent dog!"

'Telaka'clan was not impressed by the outburst and continued as if nothing was the matter. "To follow my suggestion and attack now before Starfleet devises of a plan to defeat us."

Wegnour's anger transformed into an arrogant laugh. "Defeat us? They don't have the strength to pose a serious threat to us. We will prevail," he said, albeit his voice losing conviction with every other word.

"Are you willing to take the chance to disappoint the Founders?"

Wegnour wanted to swallow but managed to suppress the urge. He understood that their overwhelming odds had dwindled since they had first engaged the Federation outpost. But he had operated under increasingly difficult conditions. What Telaka'clan didn't realize, and Wegnour had no intention on sharing, was the fact that he was receiving his orders from a much closer source than anybody realized. However, he had not been given any new instructions for a few hours, leaving him without a clear direction.

"Go and organize the men," Wegnour finally said, lowering the weapon. "Assemble them for an immediate strike. But use caution. We might need the outpost's key personnel alive. Kill the rest."

Relieved by the new orders the Jem'Hadar First nodded in acknowledgement.

Wegnour lips turned up into a malicious grin. "Return at once," he added, fully aware that Telaka'clan was still hoping to see battle himself in order to fulfill his most primal urges. "I want you to remain close where I can keep an eye on you."

Telaka'clan had never imagined that he would be as openly defiant to a Vorta as he had been. He would have killed any member of the Dominion who had displayed such disrespect without a second thought or remorse. In fact, he had done so when eliminating his trusted lieutenant for

speaking his mind earlier. He had no excuses left except for a feeling deep in his gut that Wegnour was a disgrace to the entire Dominion. He turned away without uttering a single word, respect or no, he knew his destiny was sealed.

"First," Wegnour said quietly before the Jem'Hadar had a chance to slip out of the command post.

Telaka'clan froze with his back toward the Wegnour.

"Be under no illusion. Your behavior here, today, was entirely unbefitting a soldier of the Dominion. Upon completion of this mission expect to be terminated."

"I shall think you and me both," he said just before slipping out of the command post.

Wegnour looked after Telaka'clan. He had not expected the retort but now he was beginning to sense that perhaps he would remain right.

He spotted the Jem'Hadar standing closest to him staring in his direction. Wegnour angrily threw the weapon at him. "What are you looking at? Get back to work!" *Damn you and your entire brain-deprived race,* he added in thought only.

\* \* \*

"Doctor," Deen said softly as she joined Santesh-Yardo as he was making preparations to activate Archangel. "Do you need a hand?"

He stopped to look at her. Surprisingly, a smile formed on his lips. "There isn't much you can help me with, my dear," he said. "But I appreciate the gesture."

She nodded.

Santesh-Yardo looked up at the machine he had spent years to develop and that would now ultimately spell his own doom. "To tell you the truth, I never really felt comfortable with this thing," he said without ever diverting his glance. "I don't know how much you know about Grazerites, Lieutenant, but most of us are not violent people."

She stepped closer. "You abhor violence," she said sympathetically. In that regard, her people were not much different.

He nodded. "And yet I was instrumental in creating a machine designed to wipe out an entire race." He turned to look at her, his eyes mirroring a sadness deep within. "Don't you think it is appropriate then that I shall be the one to destroy it and myself along with it?"

She was no counselor. But she could have easily become one. Her natural aura—the Tenarian *Glow* as some called it—made others around her feel comfortable, sometimes even happy to just being close to her. She could inspire, motivate, and even alleviate discomforting thoughts by doing little more than speaking to another person and offering a smile. She had felt a profound sadness for the Grazerite scientist who had been chosen to stay behind and die to give the others a chance to live. She had wanted to do for him whatever she could in the little time they had left. But now she realized that even she had nothing to offer to combat the despondency he had surely felt for a very long time.

He continued without letting her answer. "It's all right my young friend," he said with a tiny smile on his lips. "This is what must happen. It is the only thing that makes perfect sense in this utterly imperfect galaxy. And there is little time to waste," he added and then quickly went back to his calculations.

She didn't know what else to say so she softly placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Dee?"

Louise Hopkins distracted her from trying to encourage the ill-fated scientist further.

"Have you seen Laas?" she said as she approached with some urgency.

"I thought she was standing guard outside."

Hopkins shook her head slowly. When she spoke, she purposefully kept her voice low. "I think she went to find Monroe."

Both women turned to look at the station's first officer who stood close to Owens and Jana Tren. Not too close though. It seemed that nobody dared to approach the commander. Either because they didn't quite trust her or because they felt uncomfortable being around a person they had watched being tortured not so long ago.

"Did you ask her?" Deen said.

"No."

She couldn't blame her. "And you're sure she went to look for her?"

Hopkins nodded. "Pretty sure," she said and then quickly turned away from Monroe. The station's first officer had now noticed the two women looking at her and had started to glare back at them. "She still looking this way?" she said after a beat.

Deen offered a subdued nod in response and then turned slightly as well as if to pretend they were not talking about Monroe. It didn't work. "She's coming over here."

"Not good."

Monroe walked slowly but determinedly toward the two women. Even though only watching her out of the corner of her eye, Deen was certain that there was menace in the way she moved. The last thing she wanted was to confront Monroe. Like the others, her conscience was plaguing her about what had happened earlier. She had tried to stop it, of course, but now she felt she should have done more. She was certain Monroe thought so as well. She had foolishly hoped to be able to put off the implications of what they had done to her until they had managed to escape this place.

The doors leading to the infirmary opened and Nora Laas stepped out. She looked awful. Her uniform jacket was gone and her mustard-colored shirt was in tatters and soaked through with blood. Just below her chest, a large tear revealed an apparently freshly mended wound.

She held a rifle, she immediately pointed at Monroe. Her face was distorted into a mask of pure rage like somebody desperately lusting to draw blood. Deen realized that she would have discharged her weapon without hesitation had it not been for the people in her line of fire.

"Lieutenant?" Owens said with surprise both at her sudden emergence as well as her disheveled appearance.

"Get out of the way," she said without giving one thought to proper etiquette. "It's Monroe. She's the shapeshifter."

"We've been through this, Lieutenant," Owens said with increasing anger. He raised his own weapon suddenly quite worried about the seemingly unstable state of his security chief. He could tell from the look in her eyes that she would not back down this time until somebody was dead.

"It's her, damnit!" she shot back, not slowing her pace, trying to get around Owens and Tren who were blocking her way.

Monroe acted swiftly, taking full advantage of her shielded position. She stepped up to the still-distracted Hopkins and snatched the phaser from the engineer's holster. Monroe spun back around, pointing the weapon at her accuser. "I will not hesitate to shoot you, Lieutenant. Lower your weapon. Do it now," she said with an intensity matching that of Nora Laas.

Deen took a careful step toward Monroe. She knew the weapon was not set to stun, none of their phasers were, and just one carefully aimed shot would certainly kill Nora. "Commander, think about what you're doing," she said but didn't reach for her own weapon.

"She knows exactly what she's doing," Nora said in her stead. "You want me dead. Just like you killed Gene and the real Monroe and McAllister and probably countless more."

"You will lower your weapon, Lieutenant. Now!" Owens said, now standing a few meters away from her.

She ignored him and instead began to sidestep the captain and Tren to try and line up a clean shot. "Next time you're trying to kill somebody make sure you don't leave them for dead in a medical bay," she said and spat out some blood. "But I guess you wouldn't know all too much about humanoid physiology, would you?"

Something on Monroe's face changed. Deen noticed it first, causing a cold shiver to run up her spine. She reached for her weapon.

"What tells us you are not the shapeshifter?" Monroe said. "The one shouting the loudest usually has the greatest secret to conceal."

"You need to stop," Doctor Santesh-Yardo said and approached Monroe. "We have half an army out there trying to kill us. What point is there in trying to do the same to each other? I know what we've done to you wasn't right and let me be the first to apologize," he said and tried to

get in front of her and directly into her line of fire. "But please, save your anger for the real enemy."

"Doctor, move away," Deen called out, trying to stop Santesh-Yardo from getting too close.

Nora had managed to get around the captain, ignoring the phaser rifles pointed at her. But just as she thought she had a clear shot, Santesh-Yardo stepped into her line of sight.

"Sir," Hopkins said, clearing having seen the same thing that had disturbed Deen, and addressing the captain while stepping away from Monroe. "I don't think the commander is who she says—"

Monroe reached out for Santesh suddenly, roughly grabbing him by the neck and pulling him in front of her like a shield. She pressed her phaser against his temple and started to walk backward toward Archangel.

Within an instant, all phasers in the room were pointed at Monroe and her hostage. Most reacted merely instinctively not even comprehending what was happening. Others quickly realized what was transpiring. Commander Shelby Monroe, falsely accused and tortured almost to death had finally snapped.

Jana Tren took a small step closer to Monroe. Owens tried to hold her back but she slipped passed his grip. "Commander, this doesn't serve any purpose at all. Let the doctor go and we can talk about this."

"Wake up," Nora said, also approaching the hostage taker. "This is not Monroe. She's the same damn shapeshifter that killed Commander Edison and nearly killed me."

Tren froze and looked at Nora, attempting to get a good read on her. There was a chilling confidence in her tone now that had been absent before. Nora knew without a doubt that she was right.

"Lower your weapons or I will kill this man," Monroe said. Her words sounded strange and unfamiliar, not quite fitting the person who uttered them.

Owens looked at two Starfleet crewmen standing nearby who had their weapons pointed at Monroe also. "Go and check on McAllister in the med bay."

The two nodded and quickly departed.

"They will find both McAllister and Monroe's bodies," Nora said dryly, her eyes still piercing the imposter. "Game's up."

Santesh-Yardo's eyes widened now that he realized for the first time that the person threatening to kill him might indeed be a changeling infiltrator.

"This is your last warning," Monroe said again, this time not even attempting to impersonate the Starfleet officer's voice. "Lower your weapons now or he will be killed." For emphasis, she dug the emitter cone deep into the Grazerite's furrowed temple.

Nora uttered a sharp sarcastic laugh. "You will kill him anyway. You have no leverage here."

The shapeshifter's eyes twinkled slightly, perhaps out of concern or perhaps fear. Nora was determined now. She was going to end this anyway she had to and the changeling knew it.

Tren looked at Owens. "It's not going to kill Santesh. The Dominion will need him in order to make Archangel work for them."

Owens nodded slowly. From the corner of his eye, he could see that Commander Leva and Lieutenant D'Karr were getting into position to take down the shapeshifter as soon as it moved far enough away from the super-weapon. The imposter had not spotted them yet.

"All right," he said. "Everybody, lower your weapons."

Everybody complied. Everybody but one.

"You can't be serious," Nora said, now only a couple short meters away from the changeling. "We have to take it down now or it will kill us all." She was so focused on the hated opponent in front of her that she did not notice the Klingon who had silently and effortlessly climbed on top of the massive Archangel device and was now getting in place to leap onto his target.

"Captain," Santesh said and swallowed hard. His words were not coming over his lips easily. "She is right. I ... I'd rather die than help the Dominion."

Owens was not having any of it. "Lieutenant, follow my order."

Nora threw Owens a venomous look as if she couldn't believe what he was saying. She was fiercely loyal to the captain, always had been. She had never disobeyed an order he had given her, never even considered it. But she could not let the changeling go. Not after all that it had done to her. She would kill that thing even if it meant losing everything she held dear. As far as she was concerned, there wasn't much left in any case.

The one second she afforded herself to look away from the shapeshifter was all it needed.

"Laas!"

Hopkins' warning came too late. Nora whipped around instantly only to see the blur of an object being slung her way. There was no time to evade. She knew right away what it was when it collided with her. It was heavy but soft and organic. The changeling had used its hostage as a weapon, catapulting it toward Nora with immense force.

She heard the sickening sound of crunching bones as she was violently jerked back like a puppet whose strings were being pulled suddenly. Her body lifted off the ground for just a meter or so before she landed painfully on the floor with Santesh-Yardo on top of her. Together they slid across the smooth floor plates until they both smashed into the wall with her being squashed in between.

D'Karr leaped from the top of Archangel, holding a razor-sharp dagger at his side ready to slice the changeling into pieces.

The move had been anticipated.

As if it had eyes on top of its head, the shapeshifter simply reached out for the Klingon and grabbed him in midair. Except that its arm was no longer that of a human being. Instead, it had swiftly transformed into a thick tentacle that easily wrapped around the large warrior.

Owens and the others reached for their weapons without delay and it was still not quickly enough.

In one swift motion, the abnormally formed creature brought down the Klingon still entangled in the tentacle, and used him like a bullet whip, lashing out at the armed officers surrounding it.

Deen, Hopkins, and Xylion were cut down instantly and so were most of the remaining scientists and Starfleet crewmembers. Owens and Tren managed to avoid the vicious attack by flattening themselves to the ground in time to avoid the sweeping tentacle.

Leva performed a quick ground roll to dive underneath the appendage that finally released the Klingon only to fling him across the room to take down two other scientists who had managed to remain on their feet.

Leva came up with his phaser rifle locked on his target. He fired and watched with satisfied certainty that the powerful discharge would blast the Founder apart. His facial expression turned into disbelief when the beam simply passed through its target as the changeling morphed its shape in time to create a large gap inside its own body.

A dozen or so tentacles fired out from its now ball-shaped and semi-liquid torso. Its appearance had become sickly disturbing. Still possessing the uniform-clad legs and Monroe's head, nothing in between looked remotely humanoid at all.

Owens scrambled onto his feet, trying to bring his own weapon to bear only to be struck by one of the tentacles that proceeded quickly to wrap itself around his neck and lift him off the floor. He lost the grip on his weapon and it clattered to the ground. His hands instinctively reached for his throat trying to dislodge the appendage. It was slimy and slippery and he was unable to get a firm grip on it. It was only after a few seconds that he realized that it wasn't trying to choke him. Not yet. For now, it seemed content to just keep him dangling in the air, entirely helpless.

Owens managed to turn his head just enough to see that most of the others were now in a similar position all across the room. Everyone who was still conscious had been suspended by another tentacle, held firmly by their puppet master enemy.

The person being held closest to him was Tren and he could sense what she was feeling. This was the end. The Dominion had won. All the changeling had to decide now was how to dispose of its prisoners. It could either do the dirty work itself by doing nothing more than applying a little more pressure, or it could wait for the Jem'Hadar fighters to arrive to finish the job instead.

But there was something else he could see in her eyes. It wasn't about their failed mission or the potential end of the Federation or even their

imminent demise. It was much more personal. It was pure and utter regret. Regret that all hope for a future for the both of them together had now come to an undeniable end.

## XIX – SACRIFICE

Humans had a saying for it: Already seen or more commonly, *déjà vu*.

And although no Krellonian term for this phenomenon would do it justice, Culsten was fairly certain he was experiencing the sensation when he glanced at the massive Jem'Hadar starship on the viewscreen.

It certainly felt as if facing off with this enemy had become a familiar refrain over the last couple of days, like they kept going through the same motions over and over again, each time worse than the previous.

As he considered this behemoth of a ship on a direct collision course with *Eagle*, he couldn't help but feel that perhaps their luck had finally run out. That this would be their last ever battle.

Culsten rubbed his palms nervously against the pristine leather armrests of the captain's chair until he remembered the last time they had faced an enemy ship in combat with the captain in the chair he now occupied.

Owens had appeared to be the epitome of a calm and poised leader. Like a man who knew exactly what he was doing. He didn't know how much of that had been an act—surely Owens could not foresee his opponent's every move any more than he could—and how much had been pure confidence. Ultimately, he realized that it didn't matter. What mattered was how he presented himself to the rest of the crew, and it was quite apparent that he was doing a poor job at imitating that same sense of quiet confidence. He was a nervous wreck and way past the point of trying to hide it from the crew.

But then again, *Eagle* had been in immensely better shape back when Owens had taken her into battle. His opponents at the time had consisted

of two nimble and lightly armored fighters. He was faced with what he believed had to be one of the Dominion's most powerful battleships.

Yet there was no denying that he wished for Owens to be sitting in the chair instead of him. He was certain that their chances of surviving what was to come would have been much higher.

"Weapons range in twenty seconds," Stanmore said, shattering the odd silence that had fallen over the bridge. The tone of his voice wasn't quite able to hide his own anxiety.

"All stations, ready for combat," Culsten said just loud enough for all on the bridge to hear. It wasn't necessarily a command that was required – after all, the ship was already at the highest level of readiness thanks to the red alert, but more than anything else, it put his mind in the right place.

"Ten seconds."

The battle cruiser had not opened fire yet which meant that their weapons had a similar range to *Eagle*'s. Or it might have meant nothing at all.

"Five."

Sweat pearls dropped into his eyes. He could see the posture of the two officers at the forward stations stiffening as though any extraneous movement at all might deter their chances. Their fingers hovered closely over their controls, ready to activate the right panel at less than a moment's notice.

"Weapons range," Stanmore said, his voice rising.

"Release firing solution alfa. Helm, hard starboard, now, now, now!"

Trinik triggered the previously agreed firing package consisting of eight quantum torpedoes and one tri-cobalt device. The super high-yield

tri-cobalt projectile was the most powerful weapon *Eagle* had in its arsenal. It was not a very reliable weapon due to its slow and sluggish targeting mechanism. Small and medium-sized ships could easily evade it but Culsten had hoped that the Jem'Hadar behemoth could not.

Ensign Srena forced the ship hard to its right side and thereby revealing the only surprise their plan had contained. Culsten prayed it would be enough.

As the ship turned sharply to starboard, *Agamemnon* shot out from behind *Eagle*, performing a full body roll and accelerating toward the Jem'Hadar's opposite flank.

The idea had been that the enemy's targeting systems would have been locked solely on *Eagle* while it would have been unable to detect the other vessel riding in *Eagle*'s wake and masking its energy signature to match that of its sister ship. It had been a good plan for the little time they'd had to prepare except for one major flaw. *Eagle* would be completely exposed to the battle cruiser's first barrage and in its current condition, nobody was certain she'd be able to take it. Both Culsten and Donners would have preferred to switch roles but *Agamemnon*'s slimmer overall profile had simply not allowed for the bulkier *Eagle* to hide behind her.

Captain Donners, realizing that *Eagle* was now on the offering plate, did not hesitate to get in as close as possible to cause the maximum amount of damage. She redlined her impulse engines had transferred most of her warp power to weapons. Escape was now out of the question.

Culsten watched *Agamemnon* closing in on the target but as expected the sluggish cruiser had already selected its initial target was now slowly turning its nose toward the much more vulnerable opponent. Multiple hard points on the battleship's hull lit up in preparation to unleash its awesome arsenal.

"Evasive Owens-Six," Culsten practically barked

Srena complied instantly.

Borrowing from the captain's playbook, Owens-Six didn't include any rapid dives or course changes but instead would keep rotating the ship to keep the lowest possible profile in relation to the incoming fire. It was not quite enough to avoid the explosion of polaron beams that had been unleashed.

*Eagle*'s bridge shook hard, nearly throwing Culsten out of his seat.

"Shields down to fifty-five percent," Trinik said calmly as he hung on to his console.

"Return fire. All weapons."

*Eagle*'s answer was not nearly as devastating. The phasers simply could no longer deliver the same intensity after the heavy workload they had been through recently and the one remaining torpedo launcher was also starting to show signs of wear and tear. Both weapon systems connected with the large target but the battle cruiser's shields deflected most of what *Eagle* could muster.

"Their shields are holding," said Trinik at tactical.

"How is *Agamemnon* doing?" Culsten wanted to know.

Stanmore answered. "They have concentrated their fire on cruiser's port side. The Jem'Hadar have taken localized damage there but their shields have not been penetrated yet."

The viewscreen shifted to show the progress the other Starfleet ship had made. The other Starfleet ship was throwing everything it had at the Jem'Hadar but now also had to deal with quickly intensifying return fire. She had come in close, essentially sacrificing their defense for a swift and determined offense. It was going to cost them dearly.

Culsten understood that their best chance was to combine their firepower and target the enemy's weakest spot.

"Srena, get us over there, best speed," he said while he gripped both his armrests in order to avoid being thrown out of the seat as the bridge refused to stop trembling.

"I'll try," she said, her shaky voice hinting at an increasing loss of faith in their current situation.

A well-placed, high-yield torpedo impacted with the saucer section, ripping through the shields and blowing a wide hole into the hull. The shockwaves of the impact caused a power conduit running behind the aft stations on the bridge to rupture. Two consoles blew out instantly, throwing crewmembers unlucky enough to stand close by to the ground.

The ear-deafening noise and a shower of hot sparks made him jump onto his feet. The displays of the remaining aft stations were fluctuating wildly as he rushed toward the scene to help the injured crewmembers.

"We have sustained a direct hit," Trinik said. "Hull breaches on deck two, three, and four, sections eighteen through twenty-four. Emergency force fields are responding. Casualty reports are coming in."

He barely even heard the Vulcan's report while he had helped a stunned crewmember back on his feet but had found another one unresponsive. The young noncom man was about his age and now lay motionless on the floor. His skin and uniform were badly burned; blood was dripping out of his mouth. He found it difficult to take his eyes off the obviously dead crewmember.

"We're coming up on *Agamemnon*," Stanmore said.

Culsten remained in his trance. It was difficult for him to comprehend and yet it seemed perfectly obvious. The young man lying by

his feet—and he felt devastated that he couldn't remember his name—had lost his life because of actions he had been responsible for.

Another hit caused the bridge to heave dangerously. Culsten lost his footing but Trinik managed to grab him before his head could impact with the tactical station.

"Sir?" he said, his voice having taken on a much more pressing tone

A glance at the other man's features made him suddenly feel utterly inadequate for the task at hand. His eyes found the viewscreen showing the still attacking Jem'Hadar juggernaut relentlessly unleashing its awesome arsenal."

"Shields critical," Stanmore said in a near-shout, and even then, was barely able to make himself heard over the battle roar. "The starboard nacelle has been hit; we're venting drive plasma."

He understood what that meant. One lucky shot and the Jem'Hadar could ignite the highly combustive plasma still contained in the warp nacelle and blow it right off the ship. The resulting structural damage would certainly spell their doom.

The thought was terrifying enough to finally pull him out of his stupor. "Tri-cobalt. Give me everything we've got left," he said and made his way back to the center seat. The short journey proved difficult as the floor refused to stop moving beneath his feet.

Trinik acknowledged the order and went to work.

"*Eagle* to *Agamemnon*, I suggest we concentrate our firepower," he said, his voice automatically activating a com-link to the other ship.

"Understood, Eagle. We're sending you coordinates now," Donners' disembodied voice replied.

He looked at Trinik who confirmed the receipt with a short nod.

“Fire when ready.”

Both Starfleet ships released their weapons at the same time, targeting the same spot on the Jem’Hadar ship. *Eagle* launched six tri-cobalt warheads which were joined by a dozen or so quantum torpedoes from *Agamemnon*.

The entire bridge crew looked on with horrid disbelief as five out of the six devices were easily picked up and destroyed by the Jem’Hadar’s point defense system.

“Their shields are remaining stable at sixty-four percent,” Trinik said coolly as if he had not just witnessed their best chance for victory evaporate into thin air.

Culsten let himself drop into the captain’s chair, feeling utterly defeated. He had no more ideas, no more plans or strategies that could give them any shot at defeating their enemy. It was now unmistakably clear. They had lost.

“Shields down to ten percent,” Stanmore said. “Hull breaches reported on decks nine through sixteen and deck twenty through twenty-two. Emergency force fields have failed to initiate. Structural integrity is critical.”

“*Donners to Eagle,*” Her voice sounded thin, distant, and was laced with heavy static. And yet her own desperation was not easily missed. “*You won’t be able to withstand this much longer. Get out of here, we try to buy you some time.*”

“Bridge this is engineering. We are about to lose anti-matter containment down here,” said the voice of the deputy chief engineer. “We need to dump the core now or risk a breach.”

"At least if we blow up, we'll take those bastards with us," Srena said quietly. Her normally spotless blue face was now crisscrossed with bloody scars; her short hair was dirty and drenched with perspiration.

An explosion on the bridge forced Culsten to whip his head around. Another EPS conduit had exploded a bulkhead and a small plasma fire was now filling the bridge with smoke. There were no repair teams available to respond. And even while he watched the slowly growing, green fire, a new thought had formed at the edges of his mind..

Against better judgment he stood. "Engineering, can you eject the core and remote detonate it?"

The question must have startled the deputy chief engineer as it took him a few seconds to reply. "*I suppose it's possible.*"

Culsten looked at Trinik who instantly understood what the acting captain had in mind. He slightly shook his head. "We would not be able to escape a warp core detonation at this range. Our chances of surviving the blast are infinitesimal."

He focused his gaze on the viewscreen. "So are theirs."

Srena turned to look at him. She didn't utter a single word but he knew exactly what he was thinking. Nobody wanted to die today but the choice was no longer theirs to make. It was their one and only remaining chance to destroy the Jem'Hadar and give both *Agamemnon* and the stranded away team a chance to survive.

"*Agamemnon*, this is *Eagle*," he began, trying his best to give his voice the firmness it required to deliver the grim news. "Do you still have warp capability?"

The reply came promptly. "Just enough for low warp but we're not leaving you behind."

Culsten smiled. He understood now that Captain Amaya Donners was not the type of starship commander who'd give up in the face of adversity nor would she easily be convinced to run and save her own skin, leaving a fellow ship behind to die. It spoke volumes about her character but he knew that in this case she had no choice. He swallowed before he continued. He hadn't dreamt that someday he would have to make a call that would doom his ship. "I see no alternative but to eject our warp core and detonate in the vicinity of the Jem'Hadar. It is the only way we can beat them."

Donners hesitated. It wasn't the best time to do so. A series of impacts on *Eagle*'s hull send the ship spinning out of control. The computer announced an urgent warning about the ship's increasingly critical structural integrity.

"Eagle, eject your warp core on our mark and stand by to be taken into a tractor beam," she said after a moment.

"Captain, with all due respect, I cannot allow you to risk your ship and crew in—"

She cut him off. "Your objection is duly noted. Now, shut the hell up and do as I say."

He couldn't bear standing still any longer. He could hardly believe what was about to happen. Instead of having one ship on his conscience, he might quite easily become responsible for the destruction of two. He quickly decided that any further deliberation on that point was moot. Events had been set in motion and he had to see them through no matter what. He stepped up behind Stanmore's chair. "Will she hold together?"

His answer was nothing but an empty look. He did not know.

He looked over to Srena next who was now doing her best to keep *Eagle* stable enough for the imminent suicide maneuver. Only the second one of the day for her.

"All hands," Culsten said. "Brace for sudden warp acceleration." Even while he addressed the crew, he could see *Agamemnon* getting into position on the viewscreen. She had fully come around and was approaching them quickly to be able to scoop up *Eagle* with a tractor beam. He knew it was a ridiculous idea. The smaller *Agamemnon* couldn't hope to bring up enough warp power to accelerate both ships and at the same time maintain a stable tractor lock. Especially not considering their suboptimal structural condition.

"Engineering, eject the core. Do it now!"

He waited an agonizing two seconds for the response. They felt like two hours.

"It's gone."

Stanmore whipped around to look at Culsten, panic written all across his face. "I've lost the uplink to the warp core. We can't remote detonate."

"*Eagle* detonate, now!"

On the viewscreen, *Agamemnon* was just a heartbeat away.

Culsten didn't know where his next words came from but he uttered them nevertheless. "Trinik, target the core and fire!"

*Eagle* was gripped by an immensely powerful force. The lights failed and the bridge faded to darkness as Culsten felt his body become weightless for an instant before it was tossed across the bridge like a rag doll. He heard screams of pain and anguish as the world around him seemed to have come to an end.

\* \* \*

Nora Laas was no stranger to pain. In her fighting years on Bajor and as a Marine after joining Starfleet, she had become quite attuned to enduring high levels of punishments and her pain threshold had adapted accordingly.

It wasn't the near-broken physical state of her body that didn't allow her to simply lie down and give up. It was her mind that refused to permit it. Not now. She had finally found the person responsible for everything that had happened today and in some twisted way, it was exactly who she had suspected all along. Except, of course, it wasn't really. The distinction was irrelevant at that moment, an inconvenient detail that could be debated over at some other time. All that mattered now, was that she would see this through. Kill Monroe, no matter what.

She tried to push Santesh-Yardo who was keeping her pinned to the wall away from her with no success.

When all her attempts failed she instead attempted to squeeze herself out of her trap. She ignored her cracked ribcage shooting fiery hot pain up her body, she managed to free an arm and stretched it out in front of her to find some purchase. She grabbed hold of an exposed conduit and used it to pull herself away from Yardo, inch by inch until she managed to free her other arm.

The Grazerite stirred slightly once she had freed herself completely. He was still alive. She didn't have the time to help him. The sight that greeted her forced her into action.

Like an impossibly twisted alien octopus with dozens of tentacles, the shapeshifter held most of her comrades tightly by their necks at least a meter off the floor. It didn't matter if they were far or near, the tentacles extended all over the room like a spider-web. The changeling had kept Monroe's head as well as her legs but everything in between was a strangely formless mass out of which the many tentacles branched out off. It had stepped closer to the center of the large room, content for now to watch its constrained prey struggle futilely in its grasp.

The creature was not paying any attention to her as she managed to get onto her hands and knees.

Her phaser rifle was just a couple of meters away.

"You solids will never understand," the Monroe impersonator said slowly. "You continue to plot against us but in the end you cannot succeed. You will be conquered and become part of the Dominion," it said, directing her words toward Owens who did his best to ignore the shapeshifter.

Moving slowly so as not to be spotted by the changeling, she had nearly reached her weapon.

"Your efforts to stop the inevitable are pathetic," it said. "You should be thankful. Without order you are destined to destroy yourselves. From what I have seen over the last few days, how could anyone disagree with that assessment?"

Her fingertips were nearly touching the grip.

Santesh-Yardo moaned loudly as he was coming around.

The shapeshifter turned its head effortlessly almost one-hundred eighty degrees, instantly spotting the Grazerite scientist trying to stand. It ignored him. Instead, it focused on Nora who had frozen in place, her hand

practically hovering over the phaser rifle on the ground. A wicked smile came onto Monroe's face.

Nora picked up the rifle in one swift motion, took aim, and fired without delay.

The changeling did not avoid the incoming phaser blast. At least not in the traditional sense. Instead, a hole emerged in the exact spot where the beam would have impacted with its body, allowing it to harmlessly pass through instead.

Nora didn't get off another shot. One of the tentacles wrapped itself around the phaser rifle and ripped it out of her hands. It went flying across the room.

The form changer stepped closer to the Bajoran who had made it back onto her feet by now. "You are quite an irritating creature."

She gritted her teeth. She was unarmed and quite literally with her back against the wall. She knew she didn't stand a chance against the changeling but she was determined not to back down. She would stand her ground. "You can kill me; you can kill us all but I promise you one of these days we'll find a way to destroy you and we won't hesitate to rid the cosmos of you and all your slimy friends."

A small smile formed on Monroe's fake lips. "Defiant until the bitter end. And so emotional. It is your greatest weakness; can't you see that?"

"All I can see," Nora said, "is a pathetic freak of nature so afraid of the rest of the galaxy that it has declared war on it."

Another tentacle shot out, this time hitting Nora in the face, and slapping her hard to the ground. Nora recovered quickly, getting back onto her knees and wiping away blood from the corner of her mouth with the

back of her hand. She threw the changeling a self-satisfied grin. "Now who's getting emotional?"

Unperturbed, the changeling continued to close its distance to the rebellious Bajoran, effortlessly maintaining the other appendages as it walked. Another whack with the thick tentacle sent her backward and against the wall. "Interesting, I have never understood the solid's perverse obsession with causing physical harm to each other," it said and hit Nora again just as she tried to get back onto her feet. "Not until now."

Her face, cut up and bleeding, pain everywhere, the urge to simply remain lying on the ground was overwhelming. That was until she spotted Santesh-Yardo. Unnoticed by the changeling, he had started to crawl away from them. At first, she had thought that he was merely trying to find a place of relative safety. But at second glance she realized that he was heading straight for the small, upturned cart lying in the middle of the room. Numerous hypos and containers were littered all around it.

Nora attempted to stand again. "It's apparent that you're new to the idea," she said with some effort and spat blood. "You're doing a terribly poor job at it."

The tentacle wrapped itself around her throat and dragged her up along the wall until she hovered above the floor. This time the changeling was not satisfied to simply restrain its victim. It watched curiously as it added more and more pressure, slowly cutting off Nora's air supply.

"It is curious," it said in a genuine tone of interest. "There are so many ways to kill a solid. I wonder which is most painful."

Against her will Nora reached out for the tentacle around her neck, trying to pull it away and freeing her windpipe. She could no longer control her legs which were beginning to move and twitch on their own accord.

"You simply must tell me how this feels," the shapeshifter said with the inquisitiveness of a scientist studying a test subject. "Are you experiencing pain?"

Nora's eyes caught a glimpse of Santeh-Yardo who was now holding a hypo spray in his trembling hands. But he seemed uncertain what to do with it. His hesitation was going to cost Nora her life. "Doctor," she managed to croak. In an impressive display of willpower, she reached out with one of her arms, imploring him to toss her the hypo.

The changeling seemed momentarily perplexed by this gesture. Then Monroe's head turned and spotted the scientist holding the hypo. Apparently, recalling what the compound was capable of, it sprang into action. The tentacle holding Nora withdrew, dropping her unceremoniously onto the floor. The appendage now shot out toward Santesh-Yardo, transforming into a razor-sharp spike as it drew closer. The Grazerite had nowhere to go. The spike tore through him at the exact same moment as he hurled the compound out of his hand. The sudden impact pushed him back violently and the hypo went tumbling across the air.

Time appeared to have slowed as the changeling's eyes followed the deadly potion flying across the room.

Not wanting to take any chances, the shapeshifter released two more of its tentacles to capture the tiny injector. But in doing so it also dislodged both Leva and Deen.

All three appendages converged on the spot the hypo landed at the exact same time but none managed to hold on to it. Instead, it was pushed across the floor causing it to skitter toward where the freed Deen was now lying.

She saw her chance. Like an athlete going after the ball, she lurched for the small device coming her way.

The changeling reacted instantly, wrapping a tentacle across her ankle and yanking her backward and away from the hypo. Deen yelped helplessly as she was jerked away, squashing any chance for her to get to the hypo.

Leva had reacted even faster. He was out of position, having been released at the opposite end of the room but that hadn't stopped him from making a run for it. He sprinted across the room, his footfalls echoing across the chamber.

Monroe's head twisted slightly to focus on the approaching Romulan. It sent out a tentacle to intercept but Leva was in full sprint and just meters away from his target. He spotted the deadly spike racing toward him from the corner of his eye. He left his feet and leaped forward, diving underneath the tentacle and making it miss him by a few hair lengths, and slid across the floor on his stomach and right toward the injector.

He was too fast. Instead of holding on to the device, he inadvertently pushed it away from him and watched in frustration as it skimmed toward the far wall and right in front of Nora.

She looked at it curiously for a second as if not sure if it was real or not. Then she reached out for it and pulled herself up against the wall.

The changeling watched her carefully from where it stood but made no sudden movements. It slowly brought up the tentacle, keeping it in a hover and ready to strike. The appendage morphed into something resembling a spiked mace, then turned into triple-bladed sword, a massively heavy hammer only to eventually change back into its original form.

Nora watched the demonstration unimpressed. She took a wobbly step away from the wall and toward the changeling, the hand holding the hypo-spray hidden behind her back.

"You cannot possibly hope to defeat me," the changeling said. "You can hardly walk."

Nora didn't reply. She took another step, this one slightly less awkward.

"Time to end this, wouldn't you agree?" it said and launched the tentacle at Nora. Once again it transformed into a pointed spike, once again it would easily penetrate her body as it had done before.

Nora did not attempt to get out of the way.

The changeling's smile widened.

Then, as the appendage was just a heartbeat away from tearing into Nora's flesh, she performed a quick sidestep. The lance tore through the side of her uniform and grazed the skin underneath but failed to impale her.

With her free hand, she grabbed the tentacle as though it were a rope, and then yanked at it with such surprising strength, the changeling momentarily lost its balance. It was all the time she needed.

"You simply must tell me how this feels," Nora said and without ever taking her eyes off the shapeshifter, brought up the hypo-spray and pressed it hard against the appendage, emptying its entire content.

Monroe's eyes opened wide. An inhuman scream came out of her mouth while it retracted all tentacles simultaneously to merge back into its main body. The changeling fell onto its knees, the human face distorted into a mask of agony.

Seemingly against its will, its entire body changed back into the form of Shelby Monroe. But it could only maintain the shape for a few seconds before it morphed again this time to take the appearance of the late Germaine McAllister. It became Captain Zalak, followed by Xylion, and

then at increasing speed went through a number of other forms it had taken on over the many, many years of its existence. Another human or two, a Klingon, a Cardassian, a Vorta, several races neither Nora nor anyone else had seen before, animals, both small and large and even lifeless objects were among the formations it went through. All this was accompanied by a powerful screeching scream more reminiscent of a piece of machinery being crushed than anything a sentient creature would be able to produce.

Then it gave up on trying to resemble any kind of form at all and it collapsed into a shapeless brown goo. The ear-deafening cry came to an end as the liquid turned a darker shade of gray. It bubbled slightly but did no longer appear to be anything more than a puddle of mud.

Nora dropped the hypo and found a phaser rifle lying on the floor. She picked it up and slowly stepped toward what remained of the once-powerful shapeshifter. Her steps were careful but determined. Nothing would stop her from what she had set out to do.

She looked down curiously at the bubbly puddle by her feet. "Are you experiencing pain?"

She pointed her rifle at the center of the puddle and fired. The beam disintegrated the remains instantly, leaving behind nothing but a large dark stain and a repulsive smell.

\* \* \*

Once Owens had been released, his first concern was Jana Tren who had landed on the floor just next to him. He was relieved to find her unharmed and carefully helped her back onto her feet. "Are you all right?"

She nodded slowly, never taking her eyes off his.

He could see, sense even, that there was much she wanted to say to him. And there was much he wanted to tell her but they both knew that this was neither the time nor the place.

He forced himself away from Tren and approached his battered security chief. Hopkins and Leva had already converged on her.

"Lieutenant," Owens said as he came closer. He quickly inspected all that remained of the shapeshifter before focusing on Nora. She managed to stand on her own but there was little doubt that she had taken a beating. Her face was scratched and bloody and most of her earlier wounds had reopened. He couldn't help but marvel at her resilience. That she was still able to function after all that she had been through bordered on a miracle. And yet there she stood, still hovering over the dark patch on the floor that had been a changeling just moments before, clinging to her weapon as if it might make a comeback at any second.

He looked at Hopkins. "Go get a medkit."

She nodded and without hesitation headed for the infirmary.

"Laas," Owens said softly and put a hand on her arm. "It's all right, you did it. You killed the changeling."

She lowered her weapon only very reluctantly and then locked eyes with him. He thought he could see tears welling up in her eyes. She nodded.

"Sir."

He turned to see Xylion standing over the body of the Grazerite scientist. "Doctor Santesh-Yardo did not survive."

"Any other casualties, Commander?"

"None."

Owens looked back at the dead body of the lead scientist. The implications of his death were sinking in slowly. But once he finally understood what predicament it presented, the relief he had felt over the demise of the changeling was quickly replaced by the realization that they still had to deal with an army of Jem'Hadar soldiers standing between them and survival. Santesh-Yardo, the man who had volunteered to operate Archangel in order to rid them of that last obstacle was now dead.

Deen stepped up next to him, easily reading his thoughts. "If those Jem'Hadar were not on their way before, they surely will be now."

Owens turned to look at the super weapon that had become their only way out of this nightmare. The imposing black machine stood there quietly, still awaiting its big moment. Except there was nobody left to operate it.

Then Tren started out toward it.

"Jana."

She didn't slow her determined pace, walking right toward the main control console without glancing back at Owens.

"What are you doing?" he said as he started to follow her.

She stepped passed the transparent aluminum partition that surrounded the entire device and only then turned to face him.

A terrible feeling was beginning to grow deep in his gut. It spurred him on faster.

He was just a meter or so away from her when she reached out for a control panel that caused the transparent partition in front of her to slide shut.

He shook his head. "No."

"Michael, I need to do this."

He reached the partition a moment after and immediately tried to push it back open but the solid material refused to even budge. "Open it, Jana," he said forcefully, leaving no doubt that it had not been a request.

"I'm sorry I can't do that. We both know we're out of time. The only chance you have is for me to get this damned thing turned on and keep it running long enough for you to get out."

"You're no scientist."

"I practically helped design this thing," she said. "I might not be able to give you as much time as Santesh would have but with any luck it'll be enough for you to get to the surface."

He shook his head again. He was not going to allow this. It didn't matter that he didn't have an alternative or that he was playing favorites by refusing to leave Tren behind. All that mattered to him now was that they would make it out alive. Both of them.

She placed her palm against the transparent surface. "I'm sorry Michael but it's the only way," she said and gave him a little smile. "Let's face it; it wouldn't have worked out between us anyway. All we do is fight."

He knew instantly that she was lying. He put his own palm against the door, the solid material between them not allowing him to feel her touch.

"Goodbye, Mike," she nearly whispered and then turned around and approached Archangel.

"Goddamnit, Jana, don't do this!"

She ignored him as she began to enter commands into the console.

He watched helplessly as the pulsating red lights running along the machine increased in brightness and intensity. Archangel was powering up for its first and final display of its tremendously destructive power.

When she spoke again she didn't turn. "I figure it will be at full power in about thirty seconds. After that, I will not be able to shut it down again. I hope I can keep the power levels stable for about twenty minutes at the most."

He had found his phaser rifle on the floor, picked it up, and pointed it at the partition. His hands trembled as he considered burning himself through the sheer wall in front of him. He knew he would risk killing her or possibly all of them if he missed and struck the machine behind her.

Loud warning klaxons began blaring throughout the room. "*Warning, system overload detected. Immediate shut down recommended,*" the feminine computer voice announced in an irritatingly calm sounding voice.

"Jana!" he shouted over the noise of the sirens.

She turned slowly. "It's too late," she said. "You have to go."

With the fury of a man possessed, he smashed his fist against the partition, ignoring the pain shooting through his bruised knuckles. The door hardly moved at all.

"Sir," Xylion said as he stepped up behind him. "Agent Tren is correct. The longer we remain in close proximity to Archangel now the smaller our chances of escape."

The machine above them was now beginning to hum loudly as it began to create its devastating radiation waves that would traverse through any obstacle in its way, including walls and solid rock.

Owens nodded slowly but didn't take his eyes off her even as she stood there, staring back at him.

Xylion turned to the Starfleet officers who had started to assemble in the lab. "We have little time," he said, taking the initiative. "Take your weapons and move out. Starfleet personnel will take point, civilians will maintain three meters distance at all times."

Leva and D'Karr were the first ones to react, quickly getting the remaining scientists to line up for a quick departure. Within only a few moments everyone except for Owens had assembled.

When Deen noticed that he was not moving, she approached him. "Michael?"

"Commander," he said without taking his eyes off Tren. "Have these people moved out of here, now?"

Xylion nodded and gave the signal for the twenty-five survivors of Epsilon Twelve to head into the mines. Within moments only Owens and Deen remained.

"Go," Tren urged.

"I'll be back for you," he said through clenched teeth.

She nodded slowly.

Then he quickly turned and he and Deen stepped through the large hole in the wall to follow the rest of the survivors out of the lab.

## XX – HAVOC

He couldn't quite account for it, but First Teleka'clan found it increasingly difficult to concentrate on the task at hand almost as if something was physically pulling at his brain and refusing to let go. It had started with a dull headache but had quickly become a more persistent, stinging pain he was no longer able to ignore.

It had taken the Jem'Hadar leader considerable time to reassemble his troops after they had started to chase their elusive enemy deeper into the mines until he had begrudgingly realized that their initial attack had been a mere distraction.

Thirty of his best fighters now stood before him in the cavernous command center and he could tell that all of them were suffering in one way or another. Some managed to hide it better than others but it was unmistakable, they were all being affected by something they could neither see nor hear.

The Vorta seemed to be distracted as well. But his discomfort didn't appear to be physical. He had seemed concerned ever since they had heard that strange sound a few minutes earlier. As was his wont, Wegnour had not shared his worries with the men.

"That sound," Teleka'clan said, finding it suddenly much more difficult to form words. "What was it?"

The pacing Vorta froze and looked at him. "You mustn't concern yourself with that. Are your men ready?"

'Clan nodded. "I have four units in position to attack the base at your command."

"Good, we have to move fast."

"It sounded like a scream," Teleka'clan said.

"You need to focus on the attack," the Vorta shouted in anger. "Focus on the attack. Nothing else matters." His voice sounded near panic, revealing a clear sense of insecurity. His entire body language had changed. It was less certain, less arrogant, almost as if defeat had suddenly become a very distinct possibility.

Teleka'clan flinched as he felt the pain spreading from his head to the rest of his body, quickly becoming unbearable. He pressed the base of his palm against his forehead, desperately trying to alleviate the building pressure there.

"What's wrong?" said Wegnour, only now realizing that all the soldiers around him were displaying similar symptoms.

"Something," Clan' began slowly, "is affecting us." Driblets of blood trickled out of his nose as he spoke. He looked down at the ground where the drops had landed as though he had never seen his blood before. Then, very slowly he met Wegnour's gaze. "What is happening to us? What was that noise?"

There could be no doubt about it now. There was fear in the Vorta's eyes. He took a few steps back. "I command you to attack now," he said, trying to put as much authority in his voice as he could muster. "Commit all available men for a frontal assault."

Instead of following the order, Teleka'clan took a step toward the Vorta. "You know what is happening here."

"Who do you think you are?" Wegnour shot back, his anger not quite matching his dread. "You are nothing but an instrument of the Dominion. My instrument. You will do as I say at any time and under any circumstance," he stopped when he felt the wall behind him. "I have given you a direct command and I expect you to follow it without question."

"You will tell me," 'Clan said, having difficulties with every word he spoke.

"In the name of the Founders, you will—"

Teleka'clan reached out for the slender Vorta's neck, easily lifting him off the ground with a single hand.

"Let go of me, you animal."

"Tell me," Teleka'clan shouted from the top of his lungs and then threw him away not unlike a useless puppet.

Wegnour's body flew through the air only to slam into a bank of computer consoles before he fell to the floor. "You will pay for this insolence," he managed to say in between gasps as he tried to stand. "Kill him," he ordered the closest Jem'Hadar. "Kill him, now."

The young fighter seemed distracted and hesitated. He slowly approached and raised his rifle.

Teleka'clan was faster, reached for his weapon, and shot the Jem'Hadar without even giving him another look. He then pointed the weapon at the Vorta. "That is the second good man you forced me to kill," he said and connected the butt of his rifle with the Vorta's head. "No more. The next one to die is you."

Wegnour fell back onto the floor, a gushing wound on his temple was quickly coating his face with blood.

"What is happening to us?" Teleka'clan repeated with less effort this time. The adrenaline building up in his system gave him newly found strength. "Tell me and I will reconsider tearing every limp off your body. Tell me and I will allow you a quick death."

The injured Vorta shot him a glance filled with venom. He managed a small, vicious smile as he spoke. "There is a Founder here, you imbecile. He will learn about what you have done and you will—"

"A Founder? Here?" Teleka'clan turned away from Wegnour and looked off into the distance.

"That is correct," Wegnour said as he pulled himself back onto his feet, wiping the blood off his face. "You cannot possibly grasp the extent of the punishment he will administer when he learns of your betrayal."

But Teleka'clan wasn't listening anymore. Something else had suddenly become irrefutably clear to him. The noise they had heard before had indeed been a scream. He did not know how he could be so certain of this but he knew without a shadow of a doubt that the Founder was in serious danger.

He turned back to the Vorta who had managed to recompose himself somewhat, once again displaying the same arrogance he had before.

"You fool," Teleka'clan said and once more reached for his superior's throat. "How dare you not tell us that a Founder walks among us?"

This time, Teleka'clan's grip was too strong to allow Wegnour to speak. As he was lifted off the ground and the Jem'Hadar began to draw blood from his neck, he knew he had failed his mission. More importantly, he had failed the Founder. There could only be one consequence for his failure. He closed his eyes and accepted what was to come.

\* \* \*

"He's coming around."

Culsten stirred at the sound of the familiar yet distant voice. His mind struggled with putting a name to its owner, however. There was very little he managed to focus on and even less he could remember, as a persistent fog seemed to have settled around his brain.

He opened his eyes to see a smiling blue face looking down at him. "What happened?" he said and tried to look around. His neck instantly punished him for the attempt with a stinging pain.

"Easy now," another voice said. "You suffered a concussion and you have strained several ligaments."

The other woman stepped into his sight of vision. "Doctor?" he said as he finally recognized the people standing around him.

"I guess there isn't any permanent damage," Srena said to Wenera.

"Too early to tell."

"Any chance it'll make him more modest?"

Wenera continued as if Culsten couldn't hear their conversation. "After today, I sincerely doubt we'll ever hear the end of this."

Srena feigned a heavy sigh.

"I might have had a concussion," Culsten said and tried to push himself into the nearby captain's chair. "But my hearing is just fine."

Wenera expression grew more serious as she activated her tricorder and ran it over Culsten. "You could have fooled me with that earless head of yours," she said, referring to the distinctively Krellonian characteristic. "Just to be sure I want you to come down to sickbay as soon as you can so that I can have another look at you."

Culsten was barely paying her attention. Instead, he was now focused on the viewscreen. He could see the crimson-colored planet in the

distance, smaller than it had been before, but more importantly, he could see no other starships between them and Ligos IV. No Jem'Hadar battle cruiser, not a sign of another enemy ship, just refreshingly empty space. And then he saw it. It was difficult to spot with the naked eye at first but there could be no doubt about it. An extensive debris field had appeared where the seemingly undefeatable Jem'Hadar behemoth had once stood.

"We did it," he said quietly and stood, ignoring the pain shooting through his limps.

Srena's smile widened. "You did it, Lif!"

Culsten took a deep breath. Everyone on the bridge was looking at him. Wenera, Stanmore, Trinik, Srena, and the others, their eyes were filled with something he had never witnessed with such abundance. Respect. He had prevailed against all odds and guided them to victory. He knew he could not have done it without the crew—his crew—but for however long it had lasted, he had been their leader. Pride was a marvelous feeling, he decided, as he let it wash over him. For the first time in his life, he really thought he understood what it meant to be a starship captain, and no matter how difficult and frustrating it had been to get to this point, in the end it had seemingly been worth it. The enemy was defeated and his ship and crew had survived.

"You want us to build you a statue?" Srena said when he remained stoically frozen in place.

Wenera chuckled.

He relaxed. "Why don't you take your station, Ensign," he said. "We're not done yet."

She exchanged a quick look with the doctor before replying. "Aye, aye, sir," she said quickly as she took her position at the helm.

"Doctor, casualties?" he said and began to slowly lower himself into his chair again.

"Twenty-five injured two of which are still critical. Two mortalities."

A sigh escaped his lips. It wasn't good news but he realized it could have been a lot worse. He locked eyes with the ship's chief physician. "Thank you, Doctor."

"No, it's us who need to thank you," she said with a smile just before she turned and headed for the turbolift to return to sickbay where plenty of work still awaited her.

"We have an incoming transmission from the *Agamemnon*," Trinik said.

"On screen."

Donners looked surprisingly serious when her image appeared. "That was one of the most reckless maneuvers I have ever seen. Do you realize that if your torpedo had been just a second off it would be our debris floating out there as well?"

Culsten swallowed. "I'm sorry. The warp core remote detonation failed and—"

"Sorry?" she said incredulously. "You needed to think fast and you did," she added, her stern visage now broken by a smile. "You acted like a starship captain. You took initiative when you had to. I've come across captains with many times your experience who wouldn't have acted as quickly as you did. I'm sure you'll have your own ship one day and Starfleet will be able to consider itself very lucky to have you."

He managed a short nod at the high praise but Amaya Donners had left him speechless.

She gave him a wide smile, barring her brilliantly white teeth. “*I take it there’s still more work to be done?*”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Call me Amaya,” she said.

He didn’t quite dare.

“Lead the way. Agamemnon out.”

Her face disappeared from the screen and Culsten got back onto his feet. Every step he took was painful but he decided to ignore it as he stepped in between the helm and the operations console. He turned around to face the bridge. “I wish to thank all of you from the bottom of my heart for what you have done here today. You have placed your trust in me when you had little reason to. Without you—every single one of you—we would not still be here.”

Srena shot him a look. “What are your orders, sir?”

He turned to look at the screen, focusing on the bright red planet. “Let’s go get our people back.”

\* \* \*

It wasn’t difficult to guess which way led toward the surface. The main mine shaft was wider than the others and had a distinct upward slope. It was lined with heavy machinery that had been used only very recently in order to dig the way toward the underground laboratory.

Leva and Nora who had taken point were very aware of their dilemma. They both understood that they had little time to get to the

surface and to the relative safety outside the blast radius of the unstable super-weapon but at the same time appreciated the fact that the Jem'Hadar were still out there, assembling somewhere in the mine to prepare for their final attack.

Archangel was supposed to eliminate but Santesh-Yardo's warning had been clear. While the amplified radiation would most certainly kill the Jem'Hadar by degrading their genome on a molecular level over time, the immediate effects were not known. This meant it was quite possible that the resilient soldiers would continue to pose a serious threat to the twenty-five survivors and their final run for freedom.

"How long?" Deen said, glancing at Xylion who had brought a padd that displayed the elapsed time since Archangel had powered up.

"Eight minutes, thirty-five seconds."

Deen recalled that Tren had said that she was going to try to keep Archangel running for maybe twenty minutes. With any luck, she'd be able to keep the machine balanced for an additional minute or so but then the power levels would fluctuate so wildly, she didn't stand a chance to keep the super-weapon from tearing itself apart. The group was already moving at a brisk pace but so far she estimated that they had only covered about twenty percent of the journey to the surface.

She looked to Owens next. He walked just a few meters behind her. He had been understandably distracted since they had left the lab. His face was an empty mask but his body language spoke volumes. He did not want to leave.

"We have to move faster," she said to him.

He didn't reply.

"Michael?"

He nodded and then turned to D'Karr who was making up the rear, trying to keep the exhausted civilians moving. "Let's pick up the pace."

"Are we going to make it?" said Hopkins who was walking by Xylion's side, sounding very much like she didn't want to hear the answer

"It is a distinct possibility."

She smiled at his unusually vague reply. He was trying to give her hope. It wasn't a particular Vulcan thing to do but it was appropriate for a leader. She appreciated the gesture.

Not a minute later, the procession came to a sudden halt. Nora had signaled for everyone to stop and take cover near the walls. She had scouted up ahead and come across something that worried her.

"Hold your position," Owens told Xylion and then moved up quietly toward Nora. Deen followed closely.

"What is it?" he asked the security chief once he had reached her.

Nora indicated forward where the shaft was taking a slight turn. "There's something or someone behind that bend."

Deen put a hand in front of her mouth and nose. "The smell," she said, disgusted.

Nora nodded.

Owens could smell it too. It was a repugnant odor that seemed to be emanating from directly ahead. It seemed familiar but he couldn't quite place it. It was most definitely not human. "Is this the only way to the surface?" he asked Leva who stood nearby, keeping his eyes focused on the bend ahead.

"We didn't come through here," he said. "But I'm certain it is a faster route to get out of here than the one D'Karr and I took."

"Very well. We don't have time to draw up a major battle plan. Keep the civilians in the back. The rest, advance."

With that, the Starfleet officers set in motion, carefully approaching the corner, phaser rifles at the ready. Nora and Leva were the first ones in, Owens Deen, and Hopkins followed and D'Karr stayed at the rear. Xylon and the two other Starfleet crewmembers remained with the scientists.

Owens held his breath as he slowly rounded the bend, the flashlight of his rifle illuminating what lay ahead. The smell was becoming more nauseating with every step.

The tunnel opened up into a sizeable chamber, filled with computer consoles and machinery. But it wasn't the equipment that gave him pause. It was the field of corpses spread across the ground in front of him.

The six officers stood there in silence, the rifles giving light to one lifeless Jem'Hadar after the next. He had hoped for this and yet the sight of over thirty dead bodies, some of which were on top of each other was not one easily digested.

Nora was the first to make a move. She slowly began to step further into the cavern, carefully stepping in between the dead bodies. It was Hopkins, the usually reserved chief engineer, who was the next to follow.

"This is awful," Deen said quietly.

"They got what they deserved," Nora said without looking back. She made a beeline for an active computer console. It seemed to display a detailed map of the tunnel network.

While the rest began to fan out to find the best possible route toward the surface, Hopkins took a knee next to one of the bodies to study it more closely.

Deen was repulsed by the sight and had to give it a great effort not to inadvertently step onto one of the slaughtered fighters. It was a difficult task. She froze when she spotted an irregularity among the bodies. The floor was a gray and black mass of Jem'Hadar except for one spot where she was certain she could see a differently hued texture. She approached carefully. As she stepped closer, she recognized the only body that was not Jem'Hadar. "There is a Vorta here," she said to the others.

"So what?" said Nora, still distracted by the computer console.

Deen looked closer, discovering the gushing wound at his throat. She turned to Owens. "He was strangled."

Owens didn't quite understand what she was trying to imply.

"And this Jem'Hadar," she said as she checked the next body. "He was shot. At close range."

"Sir," said Nora, glancing up from the console. "I think I have found a way out of here," she added and then pointed at one of the many intersecting tunnels. "That shaft should lead to the surface. About six hundred meters."

Owens nodded. "Commander Leva, get the rest of the team and get them through there now."

Leva acknowledged and hurried back to where they had left the civilians.

"I wonder if they were in pain," said Hopkins as she studied the face of a dead Jem'Hadar with strangely detached curiosity. "They look so peaceful now," she continued, ignoring the fact that everybody was now looking her way.

"Lou, are you all right?" Deen said with concern.

She looked up. "I hope they were in a lot of pain," she said and threw the dead Jem'Hadar another disgusted glance.

And then his eyes opened.

Hopkins felt as if ice water had been shot into her veins. She stumbled backward, tripped over another body, and landed right in between two corpses.

The Jem'Hadar tried to get on his feet. Just as he had managed to prop himself onto his knees, he was cut down by a phaser blast from Nora, quickly followed by discharges from D'Karr and Owens' weapons.

The Jem'Hadar dropped back onto the floor, his body flopping like a fish out of water before he went completely limp.

Utterly disgusted by the stench, Hopkins jumped back on her feet. She gripped her own rifle tightly and pointed it straight at the now surely dead fighter in front of her feet. He barely moved when the blast tore through his flesh. She didn't stop there. Aiming her weapon at the next body, she unloaded another round. She slowly moved through the field of dead bodies, firing at will at the unmoving targets.

Nora joined in, seemingly taking some perverse pleasure in making dead sure that not one of the Jem'Hadar could come back to attack them.

Gripped by a sudden and overwhelming need to exact vengeance upon the creatures that had caused them so much suffering and pain, Owens aimed at the nearest body and fired his rifle.

Only after having obliterated half a dozen former enemies did he notice Deen looking at him. Her eyes didn't show anger or condemnation. It was something else, something more akin to disappointment. He froze. It was not only her looking at him, he realized. The civilians had now entered

the cavern and all of them where now staring at the Starfleet officers with astonishment and uncertainty.

"Cease fire," Owens said.

Neither Nora nor Hopkins did. And D'Karr who had by now also joined in massacring the dead seemed too preoccupied to hear the captain's words.

"Cease fire!"

This time the message was too loud and too clear to go ignored. Hopkins was the last one to squeeze off a shot before turning to Owens. She looked ashamed when she noticed the civilians' empty stares.

"Time, Mister Xylion?"

If Xylion had been disturbed by the sight of his comrades' illogical behavior, he did well to hide it. "Twelve minutes, fifty-six seconds."

Owens forced himself to ignore what had just happened. He gestured toward the shaft Nora had indicated earlier. "Head that way, double time."

Xylion acknowledged and began to instruct the civilians. But in order to get to the tunnel that led to the surface, they first had to cross the Jem'Hadar graveyard, which proved to be a slow and painful process. Understandingly in a hurry to get across, many of the civilians tripped and fell. Xylion and Leva had their hands full trying to keep them calm and moving.

"Michael," Deen said softly as she stepped up to him. "These soldiers were killed by Archangel. At least not directly."

He looked at her, now feeling the sting of embarrassment for having lost control just moments earlier.

"These men killed each other," she continued when he didn't speak. "The radiation must have caused them to—" she stopped when she heard the approaching noise.

Owens noticed it at the exact same time and within a second everyone in the cavern did as well. It was coming from within one of the shafts and it was getting louder quickly, approaching them fast. It sounded like a choir of screams. Not so much battle cries but sounds of desperate agony.

"Hostiles!" Nora shouted and instantly took cover behind the console.

Owens whipped around toward Xylion. "Move them out of here, now!"

By the time he turned back, the first Jem'Hadar came pouring out of the tunnel. Nora, Leva, and D'Karr opened fire instantly and the other armed officers quickly followed suit.

The first row collapsed before they ever even entered the cavern. Owens noticed right away that something was very different about these Jem'Hadar. They were not the same as they had faced in battle before. There was no tactic or plan to their attack. They were not shrouded and didn't even make use of their polaron weapons. Many of them, he could see, were already injured, bruised, and scratched up.

The second row mostly fell over their already downed comrades. Those who managed to get past the first obstacle stumbled over the dead Jem'Hadar spread out across the cavern floor and were easily picked off by phaser fire.

But they kept coming, in a mad rush to get to the Starfleetters at any and all cost. Some launched themselves into the cavern, trying to reach their targets through the air.

D'Karr switched over to his *bat'luth* sword as they managed to get closer and began to cut the uncoordinated Jem'Hadar down with relative ease.

Soon, chaos reigned in the cavern of death. In the growing confusion two of the rabid soldiers slipped by the Starfleet officers and launched themselves at the nearest target of opportunity. The junior researcher was so worried of getting out of the cavern that he never saw the incoming attack. Both Jem'Hadar jumped the man simultaneously, throwing him to the ground like a pack of wild animals. They began to tear at his clothes, his flesh, even his bones. His scream of terror echoed across the chamber.

Xylion hurried to the scene and pulled one of the attackers off the man. The second fighter was pierced by Leva's phaser. Xylion tried to help the unfortunate victim but quickly determined that there was nothing left to save.

"Move out, move out!" Owens shouted and began to step backward and toward the tunnel that would lead to safety while he kept firing at the approaching mass of out-of-control fighters.

The others followed his example, creating a protective semi-circle around the remaining civilians and their escape route.

A few seconds later the last of the researchers had made it into the tunnel and Owens indicated for Hopkins, Deen, and Leva to follow while he, Nora, and D'Karr provided cover fire.

"The ceiling," D'Karr suggested once they had reached the entrance of the tunnel.

Owens nodded. He and the Klingon aimed and fired at the top of the cavern near the entrance. The rocks came loose after just a few blasts and began to rain down onto the Jem'Hadar below. A few large pieces squashed

the fighters like insects and the dust quickly formed a thick cloud that made it near impossible to continue to make out any survivors.

"Let's move," Owens said and together with Nora and D'Karr swiftly followed the rest of the team toward the surface.

The tunnel that was to lead to their escape turned out to be steeper than the earlier path, slowing their progress significantly.

Owens could hear phaser fire before they had even caught up with the rest of the team. They broke out into a fast jog, their weapons at the ready.

Moments later they rejoined with Xylion and the others who were still moving forward but at a slowed pace. They were being attacked on all sides by individual Jem'Hadar fighters who emerged out of other tunnels and crevices to leap onto the team not unlike lions would onto a pack of frightened gazelles.

The Starfleet officers were able to keep the uncoordinated attackers in check, picking them up one by one with their phaser rifles but keeping up their defenses also meant sacrificing their chance at a quick escape.

Owens and Nora cut down a small group of Jem'Hadar trying to attack the slow procession from the rear before joining up with the others.

"What is happening here?" Owens said to Deen, making sure to keep his eyes and his weapon aimed at the dark tunnels that intersected the main shaft.

"It's Archangel," Deen said and fired another shot at an approaching attacker. "It's not killing them. It's driving them mad."

He nodded. Her theory seemed to make sense. He didn't have time to consider if this meant that Santesh-Yardo's project had been a failure or not. Fighting off crazed Jem'Hadar seemed easier than having to face a well orchestrated assault. In the end it probably mattered little. At their current pace they would not be able to clear the mine before Archangel would obliterate it.

"Sir, look."

It was Hopkins' insisting cry that forced him to glance into her direction. The young engineer was pointing ahead. He followed her outstretched arm and then spotted it. There was quite literally light at the end of the tunnel. But it was nothing more than a speck, still a good hundred meters or so away.

And then it was gone. At first, he couldn't quite tell why.

"The Founder?" A booming voice echoed through the mine. "Where is the Founder?"

Owens' narrowed his eyes to see more clearly. The voice belonged to a single Jem'Hadar who had stepped between the survivors and the exit. The man was nearly two meters tall and probably had the widest shoulders he had ever seen on a humanoid man of his stature. He was steadily stepping closer.

It was obvious from the fighter's physique, his body language, and even his voice that he was a leader. And he seemed to be resisting the effects of Archangel far better than other Jem'Hadar. His eyes were bloodshot and his sparse black hair was in disarray. But his apparent determination left no doubt that at least a part of his brain was still working.

Perhaps by taking down their commander, Owens thought, the remaining Jem'Hadar would lose their motivation to fight. He took careful

aim with his and found he had a clear line of fire. He tapped the triggering stub. The weapon did nothing. He looked at it curiously and it took him a second to understand. It had run out of power.

"Watch out!" Nora pushed him out of the way. Not a moment later a Jem'Hadar landed where he had stood just a moment earlier but was instantly cut down by a well-placed phaser blast from Nora's rifle.

Owens looked up and to his horror found that the Jem'Hadar forces had assembled on a ridge immediately on top of the tunnel about six meters above them. Without concern for their safety or any weapons to speak of, they simply leaped on their prey below.

"Get back, get back," Owens said, reaching out for the nearest scientist and pushing him back down the shaft.

The Starfleet officers followed suit, firing at the Jem'Hadar now attacking from above and attempting to usher the civilians out of their ambushed position. They were not fast enough. One of the researchers was killed immediately when one of the rabid warriors landed directly on top of him, breaking his own neck in the process.

Chaos was spreading quickly and Owens was beginning to lose his sense of direction as bodies pushed and pressed against him. Frightened civilians, his people trying to orchestrate a retreat, and the enemy fighters who in a state of stupor were attacking everything that moved, including their own, made it difficult to make a move, let alone trying to get his own people out of harm's way.

He desperately needed a fresh power cell for his rifle but couldn't see anybody near him who could provide one. Seeing a female researcher being attacked by two Jem'Hadar, he grabbed his weapon with both hands by the barrel and brought the butt down hard on one of the attackers. The fighter stumbled to the ground.

He swung the rifle again, connecting with the second Jem'Hadar's face with such force that the rifle broke. He dropped the now useless weapon and reached for his sidearm, instantly discharging it at another approaching attacker at point-blank range.

A large hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around; bringing him face to face with the massive Jem'Hadar leader. His eyes were burning with unconstrained rage.

"Where is the Founder?" He demanded so forcefully that his spittle hit Owens in the face.

He tried to aim his phaser at the man but Telaka'clan simply slapped the weapon out of his hand. Without hesitation Owens connected with the Jem'Hadar's lower jar, causing his opponent's head to jerk to the side. Unimpressed, 'Clan wiped away blood from his lips and struck out, hitting Owens right in his sternum and sending him flying backward.

The force of the blow took his breath away as he stumbled to the ground.

Telaka'clan wasted no time, stepping up to Owens still on the ground, and put his heavy boot onto the side of his face, pushing it into the ground. "Tell me where the Founder is or I'll crush your head into dust."

The pressure was unbearable. He knew the Jem'Hadar would be able to make good on his threat. He also understood that in his current state, he doubted very much that there was anything he could have said that would alter the outcome.

He managed to free his arms and get a firm grip on the other mans' boot, twisting it with all the strength he had left. The ankle bone dislodged and Telaka'clan stumbled away.

Owens coughed hard as he tried to get back on his feet. He didn't know much about Jem'Hadar physiology but he was certain that he was merely temporarily disabled and would quickly recover. He had to act quickly. Trying to ignore the pain shooting through his skull, he approached the dazed Jem'Hadar, balled both his hands into one fist, and began to pound against his head.

Telaka'clan didn't attempt to defend himself but refused to go down. He took blow after blow and stumbled backward until there was no more room to go.

Owens' breathing was so heavily labored, his lungs were burning, and his hands were scratched up and bleeding from the Jem'Hadar's hard face.

"The Founder," Telaka'clan hissed through clenched and bloodied teeth.

Spotting a good-sized rock on the ground, Owens quickly reached for it. "The Founder is dead," he said as his hands wrapped around the large stone.

Telaka'clan howled with anger and charged. Owens was unprepared for the sudden explosion of strength. He was caught by the bulldozing fighter, picked up off the ground, and pushed back, lodged against 'Clan, unable to free himself.

Managing to hold on to the rock, he brought it down hard against his head. It penetrated both skin and bone causing a wound large enough that should have led to a massive head trauma to any other creature. But the Jem'Hadar hardly even acknowledged the injury.

He drove Owens into the opposite wall where he collapsed back to the ground.

He felt as if he had been run over by a starship. Every single bone in his body was aching, he could taste blood in his mouth and his spine felt as though it had been badly dislocated. And yet he forced himself back onto his hands and knees.

"You cannot kill a god," the Jem'Hadar hissed as he watched Owens try to crawl away like an insect. "The Founders cannot die."

Out of the corner of his eyes Owens spotted a padd seemingly discarded haphazardly. He turned to look at it. It was similar to the one Xylion had used to measure how much time had lapsed. Another glance confirmed his suspicion. It was the same padd. The display was still functioning. It showed seventeen minutes and forty-three seconds. Twenty minutes, Jana had said. She would be able to keep it running for twenty minutes. After that, they would all die. She would die.

"I saw it die," Owens said, spitting out a tooth that had come loose, and looked up at the enraged Jem'Hadar. "If gods cannot be killed then your Founders are no gods."

Telaka'clan balled his massive hand into a fist and aimed it straight at Owens' head.

Grabbing hold of the discarded padd, he held it up just in time to intercept the incoming fist. The display was instantly shattered but the padd remained in one piece, deflecting the blow. The Jem'Hadar was momentarily distracted by the shards of sharp glass that had dug deep into his hand.

Owens took advantage, driving the remains of the padd into his opponent's face, destroying his eyes and blinding him.

Telaka'clan screamed with rage and both his hands went instinctively to his face in an effort to remove the shards now embedded in his skin.

Owens shoved his stunned opponent backward, making him stumble over a dead Jem'Hadar. Unable to see or orient himself, and with no balance, the First fell and landed on his back.

Owens was on him in an instant. Finding the large rock he had used earlier, he gripped it firmly once again and brought it down hard on the Jem'Hadar's face.

Blood and ketracel-white splattered all over his uniform and his face as the rock smashed into the Jem'Hadar's tissue and skull. He did not let up, drawing the rock all the way behind his head before driving it with as much force as he could muster into his opponent's face. Once, twice, three times, until there was nothing left but a bloody pulp. Telaka'clan's body twitched even while his face was no longer recognizable.

So covered with blood was the rock, it slipped out of his grip. Owens tried to get back onto his feet but froze when he spotted two Jem'Hadar fighters charging him in a mad fury as if to avenge their fallen leader. Owens he had nothing left to face them with.

Two phaser beams shooting out of the darkness, stopped the approaching fighters cold, and they collapsed less than a meter from Owens.

More phaser blasts shot across the shaft. Owens tried to protect himself and lowered his head but quickly realized that the remaining Jem'Hadar were the only ones being targeted. The shots had not come from his people.

A handful of figures stepped out of the darkness all around him. One of them stepped up to him, offering him his hand.

He looked up at his rescuer. It took him a moment to recognize the burly, dark-haired man. "Major?"

Cesar Wasco nodded and pulled him onto his feet. "I'm sorry we're late. We were delayed."

Owens looked around. The tunnel was littered with dead and unconscious bodies. Most of which he found to be Jem'Hadar. There were also a few civilian scientists among the bodies and he could spot at least one Starfleet officer. At first glance he counted five Marines, moving efficiently through the field of bodies, trying to assist those who had been wounded.

"Sir?"

Owens turned. Another group of survivors that had fled back deeper into the mine reappeared, led by his officers and an additional three Marines.

Nora quickly stepped up to him. "Are you all right, sir?" she said. "We couldn't locate you and we thought you might have ..." she didn't finish her sentence but it was all too obvious that she felt as if she had failed him.

"You kept those people safe," he said slowly. "That's what matters."

Nora nodded but his words didn't appear to make her feel much better about herself. She had always considered protecting the captain to be her number one priority. Now, perhaps for the first time since she had served under him, she knew she had not kept that promise. She had failed him in so many regards. And not just him.

"We're not far from the surface," Deen said and pointed toward the speck of light in the distance. "How much time do we have?"

He searched to the ground to look for the padd but could find only useless remains.

"Nineteen minutes and eleven seconds have passed since the activation of Archangel," Xylion said. Like the others, his uniform was torn and dirty and green blood covered some of his face.

"Major, help everyone who can't walk by themselves and get them to the surface now. Double time, everyone." Owens said.

The Marines wasted no time, picking up the wounded, helping them onto their feet or carrying them. D'Karr and Leva helped as well while Xylion carried Hopkins who had sustained an injury to her right leg in the recent battle.

Owens did not move.

"Michael?" Deen said, standing next to him with a bloody cut crossing her face.

He looked at her purple eyes that somehow looked less radiant than they had used to. "Go Dee," he said quietly.

"What about you?"

He turned and walked back into the mine.

She had anticipated that move. With surprising speed and strength, she reached out for his arm, holding him back. "This is insane and you know it. You'll never get to her in time."

"Let go of me!" He forcefully freed himself from her grasp.

"Michael, there is no time to get back to the lab and out of the mine," she called after him. "If you go back you die." She had tears in her eyes now.

"I have to try," he said without looking back. "You get the hell out of here."

She stood petrified as she watched Owens head for certain doom. She stood alone now. The rest of the survivors hadn't even noticed their captain's decision as they were rushing toward the exit in a desperate attempt to clear the mine before it came down on top of them. For the first time in her relatively short life, she felt completely drained of even the least little speck of hope.

## XXI – SCARS

He could hear Deen shouting his name somewhere above him in the mine but he ignored her as he pressed on in the opposite direction, back toward danger, and more importantly back toward her.

His brain's rational part told him what he was trying to do was impossible. Getting to her in time and then getting them both out of harm's way before Archangel would rip itself and everything around it apart.

It wasn't the rational part of his brain that drove him now. It was pure emotion. He would try against all odds and if everything failed, if he didn't make it, at least he would die with the woman he loved. Perhaps that was better than surviving without her.

He had managed less than fifty meters when a strong quake threw him off his feet to the ground. The entire mine shook and debris began to rain down on him. This could mean only one thing.

Owens couldn't breathe as his mind was beginning to grasp what had happened. Archangel had destroyed itself.

He was trying to struggle back onto his feet when he saw it. It was just a spark of light at the far end of the shaft but it didn't take him long to realize that the wall of fire was coming his way.

He turned to look behind him. He could see the faint outline of Deen still looking back at him. And not far behind her were the survivors who must have also realized what had happened by now. He already knew that none of them were going to make it out alive.

That's when his rational mind took over again. It was too late, of course, and all he was left with were regrets for not having been more

focused on the task of getting his people to safety. He didn't know if he could have done more but he knew he hadn't done enough.

Sweat pearls dropped into his eyes as the temperature had increased to unbearable levels in mere instances. He took a breath of ultra-heated air that felt like it was burning his lungs. He closed his eyes. He was certain he would have an eternity to think about his failures.

He felt the hairs on his arms rising and a tingling sensation spread throughout his body and for a moment he thought that death felt remarkably similar to another experience he was quite familiar with.

He opened his eyes when he felt surprisingly cool air against his skin. The fire was gone and so was the mine shaft.

"We have them," Chief Yang-Sen Chow said from behind the transporter control console. "Twelve survivors. *Agamemnon* reports they've got an additional nine," he added and gave him a wide smile. "Welcome back, sir."

Owens did not feel like smiling. Not while he was still trying to come to terms with what had just happened. He had been prepared to die; he had come to terms with it. But now that fate had been taken from him.

He looked around to see five other survivors on the platform with him. There was Deen, a young male Marine and three civilian researchers and all of them looked as if they had been through hell and back.

Owens took a careful step forward but nearly stumbled over his own feet. The sudden change in his surroundings had thrown him off balance.

Doctor Wenera stood ready with a group of medics. She quickly approached him with her medical equipment at the ready. "Captain," she said with an obvious tone of relief.

He looked at her as if seeing her for the first time.

She ignored the empty look in his eyes and instead focused on his many injuries. His face was badly bruised and bleeding. He had deep cuts along his torso and back that were obvious through his torn uniform. His right hand was completely covered in blood. "Let me take you to sickbay."

He finally snapped out of his momentary daze. He gave the men and women beside him a quick glance over, finding them all bruised and injured. "Treat the others," he said.

But Wenera had already determined that Owens needed the most urgent attention. "We will but I want to look at—"

"Treat the others!" he barked sharply and then walked past her and toward the exit.

She was briefly stunned by his outburst but quickly regained her composure. She turned to follow him, not willing to be put off her job that easily. She stopped when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Deen standing behind her. She wasn't quite as badly wounded as the captain but the usually striking Tenarian was a mess, covered from head to toe in dirt, her usually shiny golden hair darkened by dust and in disarray.

"Let him go," she said.

\* \* \*

She had been certain that this time she would not be able to cheat death like she had managed to do ever since stepping foot onto Ligos IV. She would not have admitted it to anyone else but she was sick of trying. She had looked into death's ugly face more times than she cared to remember in her lifetime but never before had she felt so ready for it.

Her last thought when she spotted the approaching shockwave was the fact that she had not been able to save the captain and the rest of the survivors. That above all else troubled her about losing her life on this distant and insignificant rock at the outer rim of the known galaxy.

Even though she knew that their chances for survival were practically non-existent, she had continued to push and shout for the others to rush for the now seemingly unreachable exit. Then she froze and turned to see Deen and Owens further down the mine, the fiery shockwave just moments from enveloping them both.

She had always known, even when she was a resistance fighter on Bajor, that she would face death head-on, she wouldn't turn away from it, wouldn't even blink.

Death never came.

Instead, she found herself in a transporter room on a ship that wasn't her own but that looked and felt familiar.

She was surrounded by Marines and civilians, most of whom seemed confused. Once the initial shock had worn off, some of the researchers couldn't hold back their tears when they realized that they had been saved.

Nora kept hers in check. She stepped off the platform and addressed the female Vulcan transporter operator. "The others? The captain?"

The woman calmly placed her hands behind her back before she responded. "*Eagle* reports they have beamed onboard Captain Owens and additional survivors."

She couldn't quite suppress a small sigh of relief.

It was only much later when she had returned to her quarters that she allowed herself to lose control.

She had entered intending to clean herself up, get rid of her tattered uniform, take a very long sonic shower, and perhaps even visit sickbay to finally give her body the proper medical treatment it desperately deserved. But she never even made it to her own washroom.

She froze when she spotted the blood-red planet of Ligos IV through the windows in her quarters. She slowly stepped closer and felt her legs give way. "You broke your promise," she whispered.

And then without warning, she felt another emotion take over. Rage. She let out a long agonizing scream before she reached out for the closest object she could find—a flower vase—and smashed it to the ground. She didn't stop there. She destroyed almost everything she could find, chairs, tables, plants even ripped apart the cushions on her bed.

Within a few moments her once spotless room resembled a battlefield. But her unbridled anger had drained the last bit of energy that had remained in her battered body.

Unable to remain on her feet, she sagged to the floor, sobbing freely now. She had wanted one thing and one thing only from Eugene Edison. She had wanted him to survive. But he had broken that promise. Worse even, she had let him break it. By now she had run through the scenario of his death a million times and she was certain, dead certain, that she could have saved him. If only she hadn't hesitated, if only she had killed the shapeshifter when she'd had the chance if only she had stopped him trying to save her, if only so many other things.

She remained on the floor crying while her mind punished her with a million ways she could have prevented the death of the only man she had ever loved.

\* \* \*

She had found him sitting in a chair in the observation deck. He was turned toward the large panorama windows and he appeared to be looking into outer space. She couldn't be entirely sure with his face hidden from her.

There was a lot she wanted to say to him. But she knew that she couldn't allow herself. Not only because she was still convinced that her feelings were inappropriate, she also understood what he had been through. Who and what he had lost down on that planet. He needed time, and so did she.

There was more to talk about than her conflicting feelings, however. Much more. She didn't know where to begin.

As she moved closer, she noticed a bloodied rag on the table, he had used to wipe his face. He had not been to sickbay yet.

"I hear Doctor Wenera is looking for me," he said but refused to make eye contact.

She nodded when she realized that he could see her from the reflection in the window.

"How are the survivors?"

"The civilians are shaken up, of course," she said. "The Marines are mostly fine but Lou had to undergo some minor surgery for her leg. Otherwise, everyone got out without much more than cuts and bruises," she added unconsciously touching her chin where she had been cut badly during their last encounter with the Jem'Hadar. The wound had now completely disappeared.

"Not everyone got out."

Deen silently cursed herself for the slip-up. "How are you holding up?"

"I feel dizzy," he said and finally swiveled his chair around to face his long-time friend. His uniform was still dirty and covered with blotches of blood, not all his own. His face looked swollen and was plastered with cuts and bruises. He clearly needed much more attention than a rag could provide.

She stepped up to him and gently pressed a hypo-spray against his neck. "We were exposed to high levels of radiation down there. This should make you feel a bit better," she said as she emptied the content into his bloodstream.

"Thanks."

She gave him a curt nod and headed back toward the doors. She stopped before she had reached them and turned to face him again. "Michael, I'm sorry for—"

He raised his hand, cutting her off. "There is nothing you have to apologize for. You—all of us—did what we could. In the end, we managed to get some of the people out of there and more importantly, deny the Dominion a weapon that could have easily changed the course of this war."

For a moment she didn't speak. She simply watched his eyes, which appeared emptier than she had ever seen them before as if all life had been forcefully drained out of them, leaving behind a soulless shell.

"You loved her, didn't you?"

He turned his chair to the window again.

She took a small step closer. "I'm sorry for the way I've acted over the last few days. I'm sorry I didn't trust her the way you did."

"You had no reason to."

She shook her head. "I should've known that if you trusted her, it meant that she was deserving of it. The fact that you loved her means that she was a good person, I'm convinced of that now."

"She was always stubborn," he said, the tone of his voice becoming softer. "She always did what she thought was right and she'd stick to her guns no matter what," he added and uttered a short laugh. "It didn't matter how much proof you'd show her to evidence the contrary, if she didn't believe it, there was no way of swaying her. But she was also sensitive and passionate. When she set her mind on something, she put all her heart into it and more. And when she failed, she'd pick herself up and try again. Giving up was not in her nature."

"It's not in yours either."

"She believed in Archangel. She truly believed that it would end this war and the suffering. You probably couldn't see it," he said. "Even I almost missed it but all she wanted was to stop the suffering. In the end, she knew that her only choice was to destroy it and herself along with it."

"What she did was very brave."

He stood and looked at her. "It was foolish," he said sharply.

She recoiled slightly at his intensity.

"If she had been honest about it from the start, maybe we would have done things differently," he said and she could see the anger swell up in his eyes as he spoke. "All these stupid games and pointless secrecy. And what did it get us? We lost a lot of good people down there. We lost Archangel, we lost her, we lost Gene."

She did not know how to reply to his outburst. She knew that he was right but she also realized that the last thing he needed was to be

reaffirmed that the person he had loved and had given her life for their escape should deserve so much blame. She found it difficult to blame her for it now. It had been easy enough when she had been alive but it was impossible to argue with somebody who was not. And no matter how she had felt about her, she had never believed that Jana Tren deserved the fate that had ultimately befallen her.

"Gene, Jana Tren, Santesh-Yardo, Monroe, and all the others who lost their lives here today should be remembered for what they died for. They all gave their lives to defend the Federation, to save those who survived. There isn't a greater honor we could bestow upon them."

He smiled weakly. "I should've been among them," he said and turned away.

Deen took two angry steps toward him. "Now that is a stupid thing to say," she said forcefully. "Without you, their sacrifice would've been in vain, you understand? You did what you had to do to get us out of there and if you hadn't then you and all of us would be dead now, don't you forget that. Somebody once told me that we have little control over who lives and who dies. That the only difference we're really able to make is how we decide to face the inevitable. It's easy for you to wish you had died, Michael. The real challenge is to be able to live with what has happened."

"We have little choice," he said and looked at her once more. "We're needed now more than ever. There'll be no easy fix for us to get us out of this war. We'll have to fight and I fear it will be a long and bitter affair and by the time it's all over there'll be little of us left."

But she refused to take part in his gloomy assessment. "We'll get through this one. We'll continue to fight and like Jana Tren we'll never give up. After all, we have one thing the Dominion will never understand: An unwavering desire to remain a free people and slaves to no one."

His eyes were once again fixed upon the stars. He had heard every single word she had said, he had noticed her rising passion and yet she had failed to convince him. He felt as though he had lost part of himself on the planet below and he was certain it was the better one. With it, he had lost love, passion, and hope. What remained now felt empty and left a distinctly bitter taste in his mouth. His chest felt constricted and breathing had become a more laborious effort.

There was, of course, still his duty as a starship captain and his service to Starfleet and the Federation. She was certainly right about at least one aspect. He would continue fighting for as long as he had a breath left in his body.

\* \* \*

In her four years as a Starfleet nurse, Leela Adams had never encountered a more stubborn patient and she had treated numerous Vulcans and at least three different starship captains.

She attempted to bring up the bone-knitter to the injured arm for the third time and for a third time the patient refused to cooperate.

"I cannot attend to your wounds if you don't remain still," she said with surprising annoyance in her tone, considering the person she was trying to heal. Not many would have dared such a defiant tone considering the patient.

"I do not require your assistance," D'Karr grumbled as he pushed the hand with the medical instrument away as if it contained poison. "Just get me some blood wine," he added with a feral grin. "That will help with the pain."

Adams sighed loudly. "As I told you before, we do not prescribe alcoholic beverages for medical treatments. If you just let me do my job, I assure you the pain will subside."

"It's not the pain he's truly worried about. He just wants to keep the scars," said Leva as he approached them both. "They'll serve as a testament to what transpired today and to prove his stories true."

D'Karr laughed. "Oh, they'll believe the stories," he said and sat up. His deep voice quickly attracted the attention of everyone in sickbay. "I'll challenge anyone who will doubt their veracity," he added with a threatening glance toward the medical staff, most of whom decided to avoid direct eye contact.

Adams remained stoic. "I'll fix your arm," she said, eliciting a disapproving growl from D'Karr. "But I promise I'll keep all your flesh wounds intact," she added with some discomfort since it went against her better judgment as a medical professional.

D'Karr reluctantly presented the broken limb and then smiled when she began to use the bone-knitter somewhat unsteadily. "Let's see then if you are as good at medicine as you are at playing that musical device of yours. I doubt it."

Adams looked up with a frown, not sure if she was supposed to feel complimented or insulted. She decided to let it go and concentrated on mending the broken bones.

"You appear to be in good spirits considering that we almost didn't make it out of that mine alive," Leva said as he watched him being treated.

His eyes gleamed when he spoke again. "We are alive, are we not?"  
"Barely."

D'Karr nodded with seemingly aberrant pensiveness. "I could see *Sto-vo-kor*, I could feel it pulling me in. We were but on the threshold of crossing over to the other realm, and truthfully, I felt as though I was ready to be welcomed by the honored souls of those who had fallen in battle. But it was not our time. Not yet."

Adams finished with the arm.

He flexed his muscles and moved his joints. "Not bad, little woman."

She just glared at him. "If you need anything else, feel free not to call on me," she said in an icy tone and quickly stepped away to find a more willing patient. It was going to be an easy task.

D'Karr roared with laughter as he watched her depart.

"I didn't have a chance to say it but you fought well down there," Leva said, making it sound like a throwaway remark.

D'Karr quickly focused on the man. "You're not going to get soft on me, are you? I don't need your compliments."

"Don't flatter yourself, Lieutenant," Leva said. "I'm merely giving credit where it is due. As your superior officer, it is part of my job to evaluate your performance."

He stood from the bio-bed. "I'm sure my superiors in the Defense Force will be exhilarated to read a performance report written by a Romulan."

"Half-Romulan," he corrected and turned to leave.

"Mister Leva."

He stopped. The way D'Karr had spoken his name gave him pause and he couldn't quite explain why at first. Then it hit him. D'Karr had never called him by his name before. He turned slowly.

"Those ears and that green blood of yours had me fooled for a while," he said. "Your human side is nauseatingly more prominent."

The two men simply stared at each other as they had done so many times before. But this time there appeared to be something else in their respective eyes. It wasn't revulsion. They had gone into battle, they had fought side-by-side, and they had faced death together. In the end, they had both come out on the other side alive. It was not the conclusion either one of them had anticipated. The respect that had grown out of this bond remained unspoken.

Leva reached for a towel and threw it at D'Karr who easily caught it. "Do me a favor, will you?" Leva said as he turned to the exit once more. "Clean yourself up before you report to duty. I don't want you to bleed all over the ship."

Leva had a tiny smile on his lips. He was determined not to show it to the Klingon as he stepped through the doors and left sickbay.

## EPILOGUE

Most of his wounds treated, cleaned up, and clad in a fresh uniform Captain Michael Timothy Owens stepped onto the bridge of his ship for the first time since he and his officers had left for the ill-fated mission to what had once been Starfleet outpost Epsilon Twelve.

The bridge was in bad shape. Only about half the computer consoles seemed operational and the scorched bulkheads were either lined with cracks or featured prominent fissures. Once hidden cables and conduits now lay bare and there was an unmistakable smell of recent battle in the air.

Owens had read the report of what had transpired in his absence and he understood that *Eagle*'s survival had not been guaranteed at any point. While he and the senior officers had fought desperately to survive on the planet below so had *Eagle* and her crew struggled not to fall victim to the vicious Jem'Hadar.

The damage was extensive. The ship had lost its warp core and most of its offensive and defensive capabilities. Life support was still working but there were power outages throughout the ship as the EPS power grid had taken serious damage, having required the evacuation of entire decks.

"Captain on the bridge."

Owens froze when he heard Leva's surprising announcement. It had been a long time since those words had been uttered on *Eagle*. It was not standard practice on Starfleet vessels to announce the commanding officer's arrival but many captains had kept the old maritime tradition in place. Not so Owens.

All senior officers appeared to be present and upon hearing the tactical officer they quickly lined up along the starboard bulkhead and stood at full attention.

Owens nodded with appreciation at the gesture as he slowly made his way from the turbo-lift toward the command area at the center of the bridge, walking passed all his officers, exchanging a glance with each one of them.

Xylion, So'Dan Leva, DeMara Deen, Major Cesar Wasco, Louise Hopkins even Lieutenant D'Karr were present to offer his respects to the man who had led them to victory against overwhelming odds.

Owens painfully took note of two missing officers. Gene Edison and Nora Laas. The former, of course, would never set foot on *Eagle* again and he understood why his security chief was not there. Truth be told, he wanted nothing more than to hide himself away as well. It was not an option for the ship's captain.

Ashley Wenera stood with Lif Culsten, Lieutenant Trinik, Lance Standmore, and Ensign Srena near the main viewer, slightly separated from the others they also stood at attention.

The viewscreen showed another familiar face. Amaya Donners stood in front of her seat on the bridge of *Agamemnon*, patiently waiting for Owens to complete his short journey.

She only spoke once he had arrived in front of his own chair. "Michael, it's good to see you again," she said somewhat formally. She, of course, had learned by now much of what had transpired on the planet. While she didn't know all the details of Owens' encounter with the Jem'Hadar, she was aware of the losses he and *Eagle* had taken on this day. "Please allow me to offer my condolences."

"Thank you, Captain," he said not even noticing that he had not called her by name. "I understand we are in your debt. Without your assistance, *Eagle* would not have survived."

"I cannot take all the credit," she said and looked to her right where she spotted the officers who had manned *Eagle* in Owens' absence. "It's safe to say that it was your crew who saved not only your ship but mine as well. If you're looking for heroes, they are right there with you."

Owens nodded slowly and gave Culsten an appreciative nod before facing his colleague on the *Agamemnon* again. "I will make sure that they will receive the commendations they deserve."

"*As will I,*" she said and paused momentarily, regarding her old Academy friend. He felt distant from her, almost like a stranger. "*We have received new orders from Command,*" she finally continued. "*Agamemnon is to head to Starbase 375 to take part in a possible counter-offensive against Dominion forces. But first, we will tow you to a repair facility.*"

"Understood. Please stand by for our signal. Owens out."

With that, she disappeared from the viewscreen.

He turned to Culsten. "Lieutenant, we all owe you a great debt of gratitude for what you've accomplished today. You went far beyond what anyone could have expected from you."

"Thank you, sir," he said, maintaining his firm posture. "But I would have been unable to accomplish anything without the extraordinary dedication of the officers under my command."

"Humility doesn't suit you, Lieutenant," Owens said with a small smile. "But it is duly noted. Please accept my thanks for keeping my ship in one piece. All of you."

Culsten, Srena, Wenera, and Stanmore nodded with pride. Trinik managed to keep his expression far more subdued.

Owens turned to look at the officers who had been on Epsilon Twelve with him. "As for you," he said. "Every one of you displayed courage and strength I would not have thought possible. I want to make it absolutely clear that without all of your combined efforts, we would not have managed to come out of this one alive. I don't know how much of what happened on this planet will ever become public knowledge but I know with certainty that there will be at least one song that will be sung in your honor," Owens said and then looked at D'Karr who quickly nodded with agreement. He had little doubt he was already working on the lyrics that would feature the impossible victory of one Klingon and a handful of Starfleet officers against a seemingly undefeatable changeling and an endless army of Jem'Hadar.

Owens was pretty sure the Federation would want to classify everything to do with Archangel and Epsilon Twelve, especially since that risky experiment had ended in such a devastating failure. But no matter how secret they intended to keep this entire affair, Owens and his people would never forget what had happened here.

"Stations," he said and watched as his officers broke up and quickly took their positions around the bridge. Those who had no particular place to go stood at ease and remained on deck.

Owens slowly took his chair and looked at the viewscreen still displaying the red planet of Ligos IV. He quickly came to despise the sight of it, and yet he knew it would remain etched in his memory for the rest of his life. It had given him nothing but pain and suffering. It had taken their blood and their lives and he knew that he would never return to this place as long as he was alive.

"Mister Culsten, signal the *Agamemnon* that we stand ready to depart," he said. "Let's get the hell outta here."

BEYOND THE RIM OF STAR-LIGHT  
MY LOVE IS WAND' RING IN STAR FLIGHT  
I KNOW HE'LL FIND IN STAR-CLUSTERED REACHES  
LOVE, STRANGE LOVE A STAR WOMAN TEACHES  
I KNOW HIS JOURNEY ENDS NEVER  
HIS STAR TREK WILL GO ON FOREVER.  
BUT TELL HIM WHILE HE WANDERS HIS STARRY SEA  
REMEMBER, REMEMBER ME.

" THE THEME FROM 'STAR TREK' "

BY GENE RODDENBERRY

*the adventures will continue ...*

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