

EVS-I



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VIGNETTE SERIES ONE PRELUDE TO WAR

A COLLECTION OF SEVEN SHORT STORIES
FEATURING THE CREW OF THE U.S.S. EAGLE

VIGNETTE SERIES ONE
PRELUDE TO WAR

THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES EVS #1
BASED UPON 'STAR TREK®'

BASED UPON “STAR TREK®” CREATED BY
Gene Roddenberry

“THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES” WRITTEN AND CREATED BY
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All The Time in The World

San Francisco

May 2356

The fog had come out of nowhere and now old Golden Gate was almost entirely drowned by the thick white mist that served as a well-recognized trademark of The City by the Bay almost as much as the iconic suspension bridge itself.

Only the two tall, red pillars and connecting cables were still clearly visible from the window of his room. The view was marvelous on almost any given day and even a foggy morning like this held an undeniable charm.

But Cadet Michael Owens – no, ensign, he reminded himself – looked out onto the snowy white sight with little excitement. And yet there was much to be excited about. After four long years at the Academy, some hard and challenging, others filled with pure exhilaration, his time as a cadet had come to an end. He had graduated, his final grades were in, his new rank confirmed, and even his first assignment decided on.

His father, an important man working at the very core of Starfleet Command had known the news before he had. He had been proud, of course. Seeing his son following his footsteps had been a lifelong dream of his. Michael had only joined Starfleet to please him. Even though it had been Matthew – his older brother – who his father had initially singled out to be the one to follow in his footsteps.

Owens Senior had been close to obsessive about the notion, working hard to discourage any ideas that he could find his future in marine biology and become an oceanographer like his mother had been. Her unexpected death had ended both brothers' desires of one-day exploring distant oceans at her side.

Michael had never understood why his father had been so determined to see his sons following his own path. In the end, Jon Owens had pushed too hard and Matthew had packed up his bags and left home.

Michael, too young to leave, had remained alone with his father in a large empty house nestled in the Wisconsin countryside. A house made even emptier by the Starfleet officer's long absences from

home. With Matthew out of his reach, his father had focused all his efforts on his younger son and Michael had eventually given in, making the day he joined Starfleet Academy, the happiest day in his father's life. Or so he had claimed.

It had been tough on Michael at first. Unlike most cadets, Starfleet had never been his first choice. He had been shy and mustered up just enough motivation to pass his classes at first. But Michael Owens was to be transformed into a different kind of man over his four years at the Academy, and now, on the eve of his departure, he could imagine no other path for him. He seemed destined to make the leap to the stars, to discover the unknown, and most importantly, to become what he wanted most in life.

A starship captain.

"U.S.S. *Saber*, experimental prototype, brand-spanking new, just a few days out of Utopia Planitia," said a distinctive feminine voice, interrupting Michael's thoughts.

Michael caught her reflection in the glass and turned to see Amaya Donners stride into his quarters unannounced. She had always tended to do that much to his roommate's frustration.

He didn't quite understand why Jarik minded, Amaya was a knock-out. Perhaps it was because he was half-Vulcan. Or perhaps because he had always assumed that there was something more going on between him and the dark-skinned beauty from Shreveport, Louisiana. After all the two of them spent a great amount of time together, best buddies and all, but he had always insisted that their relationship was purely platonic in nature.

Jarik was too smart to not see through that lie.

She had a large smile on her face, baring her pearly white teeth, as she playfully waved a padd in her hand. "And guess who's going to pilot her?"

Michael nodded slowly and walked over to his bed where he had started to pack his belongings into a large carryall. "Congratulations."

Amaya's smile widened as she mistook his tone as a sign of pure jealousy. Rivalry had been like a sport to them over the years. "Yeah, let me see you top that one."

"On the table," he said while he placed another shirt into his bag.

She noticed the padd and quickly picked it up to read its content. She froze in place. "Son of a -" she finished the colloquialism in her mind only. "The *Fearless*?" she said with all too obvious surprise. The ship was quite famous in Starfleet. It was one of the most requested assignments throughout the fleet. Not only was an assignment to a deep-space explorer a guaranteed path to a quick promotion but the ship and her crew were also renowned for the many discoveries they had made both in the Alpha and Beta quadrants.

She was probably well aware that the ship was currently in the system, awaiting another mission into uncharted territory that was sure to only add to her fame and glory. "How the hell did you pull that one off?"

He merely shrugged.

Michael didn't need to tell her that he was well-connected within the Fleet, although many cadets had relatives who were current or former Fleeters. Her parents both served in the Border Service.

She did like to tease him about his father's position and his barely concealed obsession with seeing his son succeed. He was glad that she suppressed the urge.

She took a step toward him, still holding his padd. "This is incredibly good news, Michael," she said with a tone entirely devoid of envy. She could do that quite well.

"You would think so," he said and stopped packing. "You would think that people would be happy for me. That they would encourage me to follow my dreams and give me their full support."

"What's the problem?"

He turned to face her. "Problem? Who said there was a problem?" he said and snatched the padd out of her hand. "This is what I want and I'm going to get it. And I tell you something else, I'm going to be good at it, and people will take notice and I'll climb up that ladder all the way to the top. I'll see things nobody has ever seen before but eventually," he paused. He didn't sound excited when he spoke. Instead, his speech had a very tense, almost angry edge to it. "I'll come back," he added much softer and then looked straight at her. "Right?"

She nodded slowly, after all, they had both been looking forward to this for a long time. To finally leave the Academy behind and venture out into the galaxy. To end their existence as nameless cadets and join those legendary explorers who really mattered in the grand scheme of things. Delusional fantasies perhaps but not entirely.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

Michael caught another glance of the bay’s most remarkable landmark, still blanketed into glistening fog. “It really did come out of nowhere, didn’t it?”

She followed his glance but couldn’t find the answers to her question out there.

* * *

It had been another sunny and beautiful day in the Bay Area. The weather forecast had announced temperatures of up to twenty-six degrees Celsius and some light fog in the late afternoon. Only hours later would the inhabitants of the Northern Californian metropolis realize how far off the mark the prediction had been. Weather was a tricky thing and it still held the power to catch everybody by utter surprise, even in the ultra-modern age of the twenty-fourth century

Michael was not worried about the weather as he strolled down the wide walkway of the Golden Gate Bridge. His mind was occupied with something else entirely. He had received his new orders only minutes before and he couldn’t have hoped for a better assignment. His life as an adventurer would finally begin and he could hardly wait.

He found the person he was looking for at her favorite spot, just a few meters from the first pylon and standing close to the railing.

It was the exact same place he had first seen her nearly four years ago. He had been immediately smitten by her long black curls, her dark, intense eyes, and her exotic beauty.

He had been way too shy back then to speak to her right away. What he had not realized was that Jana Tren was a Betazoid and that she had easily picked up on his feelings.

A few days later they had met again, by complete coincidence. He was a freshly minted cadet and she was the daughter of an

Academy instructor. Over the following days, he found it difficult to keep his mind off her and he had come up with several clever ways and excuses to see her, including managing to be invited to Professor Tren's private home.

And yet it had been she who had taken the initiative and had opened up a conversation with him, admitting that she had taken notice of the shy cadet and had been waiting for him to make a move. Their relationship took off quickly after that and even though Tren was two years his junior, and still in school at the time, she eventually joined him at the Academy even though she never showed the same interest and excitement about Starfleet as many other cadets did.

It became quickly obvious that they had much in common. Like him, she too had joined Starfleet because of her father. It was her support and unwavering confidence in him that had brought along his transformation from a shy adolescent to the young adventure-seeker he had become.

"The whales in yet?"

Jana turned to consider him with a smile on her lips. "Any day now."

Michael nodded. A group of humpback whales were making their way to San Francisco Bay every summer, usually arriving at about this time of the year. For a long time, Earth's oceans did not have whales as they had become extinct due to the environmentally reckless habits of twenty-first-century humans. But according to an old story, a courageous Starfleet crew had reintroduced the huge sea mammals to the aquatic population by bringing them back from a trip into the past, and in turn, saving the entire planet from destruction.

His marine biologist mother and his Starfleet father had always enjoyed telling him this story when he had been a child. The whales had been released right here in the bay and that seemed to be the reason why they liked to return to this place.

Jana had spent half her lifetime in the city, and she had never missed the whales' homecoming.

Michael joined the sophomore cadet by the railing, looking out into the Pacific. She was out of uniform, which was no surprise to him. She didn't much care for it and he had rarely seen her wear it off campus.

"You're in a good mood," she said, picking up on his emotional state immediately.

There had been times when it had been difficult to be in a relationship with a Betazoid, especially at their age. Fortunately for him, she wasn't as well-trained in the art of telepathy as most of her kin due to her life among non-empaths. She couldn't read his every thought but there had been occasions where he had wished for a less perceptive companion. Today was not one of those days.

He grinned broadly. "What gave me away?" he said as he casually leaned against the barrier next to her.

"You're positively radiating. I don't think a person in a fifty-kilometer radius could miss it."

Michael nodded slowly, his grin still on his face. "I got my assignment, Jan."

"Oh?"

"It's the *Fearless*."

Jana kept her eyes on the azure-colored sea below. "Do you know when you're leaving?"

"Next week, I think," he said. "We'll have some time to celebrate."

She didn't look like celebrating. Instead, she offered a curt nod in reply as her gaze remained unchanged.

Michael moved around her. "This is fantastic news, Jan. You know how much I wanted to get onto an explorer. And the *Fearless*? I mean it doesn't get much more explorer than that."

"I guess not."

"You're not happy for me?"

She turned to look at him. She didn't speak right away. Instead, she seemed to probe him, her dark eyes drilling into his. He knew that look. He knew what she was doing and he didn't like it one bit. She sighed and turned back to the bay. "I'm happy for you, Michael. This is what you want."

"Hang on a minute," he said. "We talked about this and you were perfectly fine with me getting a starship assignment. Your exact words I think were 'It would be an amazing opportunity'."

"For you," she said. "An amazing opportunity for you."

He frowned.

She turned away and began to slowly walk down the bridge. Michael quickly followed her.

“What happened to Jupiter Station?” she said without looking at him.

He sighed. It was true that he had suggested it as a possible destination once he had graduated. He had an uncle who served on the station orbiting the solar system’s largest planet. He knew that going there would have kept him close to Jana who was still two years away from leaving the Academy but the idea of serving on a starbase, so close to home no less, had never really appealed to him.

“I would look pretty foolish if I were to decline a posting on the *Fearless* to serve on Jupiter Station. They don’t hand out these assignments like candy, you know?”

Jana stopped. “So that’s it then?”

“Huh?”

“Us I mean. Just like that.”

Michael stepped in front of her, both shocked and outraged by her suggestion. Of course, he understood that their relationship would suffer from his decision to leave. But he had never had any intention of ending it. He was in love with her, always would be, or so he told himself.

“Of course not. Just because I’m taking a deep-space assignment doesn’t mean we have to stop seeing each other.”

“Last time I checked, transporters don’t work across quadrants. Even subspace communications are useless once you venture into the unknown. Kinda tough seeing each other when you’re out of reach.”

“Jana I –”

She cut him off. “I tried to tell you before, Mike. This is exactly how it starts. You go off to see a far corner of the galaxy and after a few months, I’ll never hear from you again. It’s a story as old as Starfleet, probably older.”

Michael shook his head, not willing to believe. “I’ll be back, Jan.”

“Sure, you will,” she said. “Someday. And then what? You’ll be a different person, you might even have met somebody else or–”

“I won’t cheat on you.”

She offered him a small smile. “I didn’t say cheat. But it doesn’t matter. Even if you don’t, you’ll just find a new assignment

somewhere else. You'll travel from one distant star to the next. It's who you are, Michael," she said and stepped around him to continue down the bridge.

He stood there for a moment, alone, considering her words carefully. He had never thought about it that way. Some of what she had said he knew made sense. But he also knew that he could make this work. They were both young and able, he had graduated Starfleet with high honors, his instructors had promised him a glorious future, and he was determined to have it. And he wanted Jana at his side, too. He knew it could be done.

He quickly caught up with her again. "You have to give it a chance, Jan. I love you, you know that. I will fight for us, why won't you?"

She sighed. "Your father."

Michael froze in place. "What the hell does he have to do with any of this?" he said with irritation. His father was the last person he wanted to think about now.

"He was in love with your mother too, wasn't he?"

The answer of course was *yes* but he chose not to say it out loud.

"He made her the same promises you are making me now, didn't he? And how often did you see the two of them together, Michael?"

"They —", he wanted to come up with a good response but he could not think of one. She was right. His mother may not have been a lonely woman but the person who had mattered the most to her had hardly ever been around, that much he knew. "My father is a very bad example, Jan," was the answer he finally settled on.

"Oh, yes? Then how about mine? How about every other wife or husband of a Starfleet officer? Is that how you see our life together?"

"What would you have me do, Jan? Leave Starfleet? You know I'm not going to do that. This is where I belong."

She nodded. "I know you do. And I know what you truly want. And it isn't me."

"That's not fair."

"It's the truth," she said and continued toward the other side of the bridge.

“We are both still young, Jan,” he called after her. “We can make this work. We have all the time in the world to make this work.”

A few passing pedestrians shot him curious glances. Some seemed to have a touch of concern in their eyes, feeling sympathy for the frustrated young man. Others simply looked upon the scene with almost complete indifference. As if they had seen it a million times before. Yet another relationship falling apart because of the sacrifices demanded by the exploration of deep space. Here, at the very heart of Starfleet, it happened every other day.

“Goodbye, Michael,” Jana nearly croaked. She didn’t look back however; she didn’t want him to see the tears in her eyes.

* * *

“All the time in the world,” Michael whispered to himself, his eyes still focused on the fog-covered bridge.

Jana was wrong, he thought, if she believed that he was going to let her go this easily. Yes, he would take the assignment on the *Fearless* and go where no man had gone before but he’d be back and he would be with her again. After all, his life had only just begun.

“Michael?”

He turned from the window to see Amaya’s worried expression. He had almost forgotten that she was still there, so deep had he been in his thoughts.

She glanced back out of the window and a knowing look crept onto her face. She knew of Jana Tren. She could not exactly claim that she was best friends with the younger woman but that was mostly because they traversed in different circles.

Once upon a time she had considered what it be like to be more to Michael than just a good friend but she had seen how much he had been in love with Jana and she knew better than to come between them. She also remembered that they liked to stroll up and down Golden Gate together.

“Are you okay?”

Michael smiled. It looked forced. “Of course, I am. I’m going to be on the *Fearless*,” he said. “I’m better than okay.”

She nodded reluctantly and was about to add some encouraging words when he beat her to it. He put his arm around her shoulder and dragged her toward the door.

“Let’s get to celebrating.”

Just before they left the room, Michael allowed himself one last glance over his shoulder and out of the window. He just knew he would see Jana Tren again.

What he didn’t realize then, was that it would take eighteen years for that to happen.

Detour

October 2372

This story takes place a few days after the events of Tempus Fugit

Why Commissioner Velgan had not returned to Vulcan on the *Agamemnon* with the rest of the diplomatic delegation was a mystery to Lieutenant Junior Grade Lif Culsten.

He also couldn't quite explain why he had decided to stay on *Eagle* instead of joining his colleagues on the planet Farga. It all seemed to matter little now. The fact of the matter was that the commissioner needed to be shuttled to Starbase 157 after *Eagle* had received a distress signal from the nearby Romulan Neutral Zone and was duty-bound to investigate.

The stoic Vulcan had insisted that his business on the starbase was of paramount importance and could not be delayed under any circumstance. Captain Owens had reluctantly agreed to have Lif take him there on a shuttle while *Eagle* answered the call for help.

The trip to 157 would take a whole day at warp four and Lif was not looking forward to spending the twelve-hour journey with Velgan at his side.

Of course, these kinds of missions were nothing new to him, after all, he had started his career shuttling people from one place to another. It had not been the most glamorous assignment for a former flight leader of Starfleet Academy's famous, sometimes infamous Nova Squadron. But the truth was that he liked piloting small craft, often much more so than heavy and sluggish cruisers like *Eagle*. Especially when he was flying alone, and when he could really push the little vessels to the limits of their capabilities by performing the kind of maneuvers that were every flight instructor's worst nightmare.

He looked over at the co-pilot seat to catch a glimpse of the Vulcan commissioner. The man was not quite as tall as most other Vulcans and he didn't seem to carry himself with the same weight that many of his race did. Everything else about him was perfectly Vulcan, however. Including his current state of mediation in which he

had remained since they had left Eagle no four hours earlier. His eyes had been shut close ever since and he wondered if he would notice if he would attempt to make the boring trip slightly more exciting. He decided not to find out.

“How long have you served on the U.S.S. Eagle, Lieutenant?”

Lif turned to look at Velgan with surprise. It had been the first thing he had said since their departure. His eyes were still closed.

“I did not mean to startle you.”

“No, not at all,” Lif said with a smile. Oh, he had been startled, alright but there was no need to let him know that. “I just thought you were asleep.”

“Just because a person’s eyes are closed does not mean that he is not fully aware of what is happening around him. You would do good to remember that, Lieutenant.”

For a moment, Lif took offense by the lecture but then quickly dismissed the strict tone as a perfectly normal Vulcan mannerism. “I will.”

“You haven’t answered my question.”

“Just a little under a year, why do you ask?”

Velgan opened his eyes and sat slightly more erect in his chair. “I have noticed that many races are made more comfortable on long journeys when engaged in banal conversation.”

“I see.”

“However,” the Valgan continued. “You hold a certain interest to me. The Krellonian Star Alliance is not a member of the United Federation of Planets and therefore I have not met many representatives of your people.”

Lif nodded slowly. Velgan was certainly not the first who had shown an interest in his home. And while the KSA was a formidable empire—spread across a dozen solar systems—and a reliable trading partner to the Federation for nearly three decades, it was also a place of obscurity to most Federation citizens.

Krellonians had never shown a great interest in venturing out beyond their borders and strict laws made it difficult for others to enter. The Star Alliance claimed that the reason for their rigidity was due to their insistence to maintain neutrality among the many warring factions in the galaxy. Lif knew that there were other reasons why his people insisted on their isolationist ways and that, along

with his adventurous spirit, was why he had decided early on in his life to turn his back to his home.

He felt uncomfortable opening up to others about the Star Alliance since he knew that it would be difficult to explain and even harder to understand.

Velgan seemed to sense his reluctance. "If you wish we may speak about something else."

"Whatever you want to chat about is fine with me," he said. Lif had always managed to come across as an unflappable and amiable kind of guy and he would not let the Vulcan change that.

"I understand that it was partly due to your efforts that the spy on Eagle was revealed. You showed great perception and might have helped to prevent a more serious security breach."

Lif was caught by surprise a second time. Velgan had shifted the conversation from an uncomfortable subject to one even worse within mere seconds. It was true that he had played a part in finding out the undercover Romulan but his actions had come at a high price, namely the death of another Vulcan delegate. He was certain it could have been prevented if only he had informed his superiors sooner about his suspicions.

"Perhaps," he said and tried to focus his attention on the instruments in front of him. They didn't seem to offer much of a distraction at the moment, however.

"You do not agree with my assessment?"

"I just think I could've done more," he said.

"It is not easy to see the whole picture when it is being painted one brush stroke at a time."

Lif shot the man a quizzical expression on hearing this very un-Vulcan-like metaphor.

A sudden warning sound coming from his console forced his concentration back to the controls. Something was approaching the shuttle and it was coming in fast. "We seem to have attracted some company." He activated the communications system. "Approaching vessel, please identify yourself and state your intentions."

He received his answer but it wasn't the one he had been expecting. A bright purple energy beam shot across the bow of the shuttle, blinding him for half a second.

“Whoa,” he cried out and banked the shuttle sharply to the side.

“It would appear their intentions are hostile,” Velgan said calmly.

“You think?” Lif shot back while his fingers raced over his console to get the shields up, power up the shuttle’s meager arsenal and at the same time evade the incoming fire.

Velgan looked down at the read-out of his console but didn’t move a single finger. “The attacking vessel appears tactically superior to this craft.”

Lif in the meantime threw the shuttle into hard angles and into every direction to stay clear of the deadly energy discharges that were being slung at them. “Great, anything more helpful you could report?” he said without considering how inappropriate his tone might have been while addressing a senior Federation official. There was no time for pleasantries while he was trying to save both their lives.

Velgan didn’t seem to be offended. “I cannot currently identify a plan of action that will benefit our situation.”

The shuttle shuddered as one of the energy beams had finally found its target. The two occupants were showered in a rain of sparks. “No offense but if you don’t have anything helpful to say I’d rather you ...” he stopped himself when he caught a glance of the unknown ship firing at them. He had wondered why he hadn’t noticed it before. Now he knew. It was almost completely black, blending in perfectly with the void of space. Its design reminded him of a massive anchor or a double-bladed scythe.

He didn’t have the opportunity, however, to study the ship’s design in more detail, whatever weapons they had, the shuttle’s shields could barely absorb them.

Another hit confirmed his theory. One console--lucky somewhere behind them--exploded and most of the ones around them died soon after. He still had helm control but he knew it wouldn’t last long. He needed to get the shuttle out of harm’s way.

“Are there any asteroid belts or nebulae in the vicinity?” he said.

“None,” the Vulcan replied without checking the sensors.

But Lif did notice something from the corner of his eyes. A planetary body and it was close. "What about that over there," he said while gesturing his head at it.

The Vulcan turned to look. "Tripoli Hector III, L-Class planet, unpopulated."

Under different circumstances, Lif might have wondered about Velgan's intricate familiarity with this sector of space but at the moment every thought not dedicated to their survival was a luxury he couldn't afford. "I'll take it," he said and pushed the failing impulse engines to their limits.

Their attacker followed closely but not close enough to prevent the shuttle from making a run for the gray and blue planet's atmosphere.

"Hang on."

Lif put the shuttle on its head and then drove it straight down toward the surface. He knew the entry trajectory was not going to be pretty; in fact, the shuttle's hull would get so hot that he was certain it would never be space-worthy again but he didn't care about any of that. This was their only chance to get away alive or at the very least buy them some time.

Both Velgan and Lif were forced to hold on tightly to their consoles so as not to be thrown out of their seats once the immense gravimetric forces began tearing at the small ship.

Sweat pearls formed on his forehead and started dropping into his eyes as the temperature in the shuttle became close to unbearable. The relentless heat didn't last long. The small craft cleared the troposphere and a landscape of craters and deep valleys opened up below them.

The impulse drive had become useless and Lif switched to thrusters to manage their high-speed descent. Without giving it another thought, he steered the ship straight into one of the narrower canyons carved into the planet's surface and nearly tore off one of the shuttle's nacelles in the process.

"I have considered your previous statement," Velgan said, entirely unperturbed by the perils of navigating in between the narrow canyon walls.

"What?" Lif almost shouted without taking his eyes off the forward viewport.

"I do not believe that you could have done more to apprehend the enemy agent under the circumstances."

"Do you really think this is the right time to discuss this?" he said while he afforded himself a look out of the viewports to see if he could spot the pursuing vessel. He could not.

"I know that you blame yourself for K'tera's death. You shouldn't."

Lif looked at Velgan which caused him to nearly miss a rock arch blocking their way dead ahead. He found the attitude controls just in time to avoid a quick and violent end to their escape.

"Listen," he began but this time kept his eyes where they belonged. "If you want to get out of this alive, perhaps it would be a good idea to let me try and do my job."

"You are a good pilot."

"Thank you for noticing," he said as he took the shuttle closer to the ground, trying to find a place for them to hide. It wasn't the best plan but for now, it was the only one he had.

"But you could be more than that."

Lif sighed at Velgan's insistence to not let him try and focus on flying the shuttle. "Trust me, right now, all you need is a good pilot."

"You should not be discouraged by what you erroneously perceive as failure. You must overcome it or forever be denied the pursuit of greater goals," he continued.

Just then Lif noticed a niche in the gray rock large enough for the shuttle to slip through. He slowed down the craft and entered into the alcove to find more or less level ground and just enough space to land. The spot seemed ideal, if he powered down all the ship's systems it would be near impossible for whoever was chasing them to find the shuttle.

The small ship landed with a soft thud and Lif quickly powered down. Then he turned to look at Velgan whose eyes were still trained forward. "Okay, what the hell is going on here?"

Velgan slowly turned to look at the upset pilot, raising an eyebrow in response.

"Don't give me that. You damn well know that you almost got us killed out there. And for what? Pointless questions and observations."

"I assure you, Mister Culsten, everything I said had a very specific purpose."

"Oh yeah? And what would that be?"

Lif held his breath when he realized that something was changing about Velgan's facial features. Too late did he realize that it wasn't just his face, his entire body had begun to morph.

He was a changeling.

Lif jumped onto his feet to get to a weapons locker at the other side of the shuttle's cockpit. He already knew it was too far away. He tore away the cover and reached inside to remove a phaser.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a female voice said sweetly.

Lif turned very slowly. The person sitting in the chair that Velgan had occupied just a few moments earlier was now somebody else entirely. The most obvious difference was that she was a woman. A blonde and very attractive woman, Culsten couldn't help but notice. She had brown eyes, a small, unassuming nose, and fine facial features. Pretty and unsuspecting, a perfect cover for a powerful creature.

She smiled as if she enjoyed the obvious effect she had on the young man. The weapon she held was pointed at him, giving him very little to smile about.

"You're a changeling," he almost spat.

Her smile disappeared. "Ever since those guys showed up, I've had to deal with this kind of prejudice," she sighed. "You know, not all shapeshifters are part of the Dominion."

"Then who are you and what do you want?"

"Believe it or not, I work for the same people you work for. Well, sort of."

"You're with Starfleet Intelligence." It suddenly seemed to make sense, the questions, the strange remarks, his (her) familiarity with this part of space.

She nodded slowly.

Lif shook his head with disbelief. "Was there anybody in that delegation who wasn't a spy?"

She smiled sweetly at him. "You might not realize this but I liked how you handled yourself dealing with the Romulan agent. I think you might be the right man for this line of work. With a little bit of guidance of course."

As if on cue the raven-black starship that had forced them to this desolate planetoid appeared by the entrance of their hiding place. It hovered there a moment and Lif was sure that the imposing ship was about to charge up its high-powered blasters and obliterate them. Instead, it slipped noiselessly into the rock niche and set down closely to the not much smaller Starfleet shuttle.

Lif wondered how their attacker had found them.

His question was answered moments after he had formed the thought. The shapeshifter presented a small cylindrical object with a series of red and green lights attached to it and placed it on the console in front of her. He recognized it immediately. It was a transmitter.

"Is that how you recruit all your members?" he said, hardly even trying to contain his anger. "And then confronting them at gunpoint?"

She looked at her weapon that was still trained on him. She tugged it away. "Just a precaution."

Lif was tempted to grab the phaser he had tried to reach for earlier. But he decided against it when he noticed the largest Nausicaan he had ever laid eyes upon climb out of the other ship and stare straight at him through the viewport of the shuttle. He did not look happy. But then of course he had never seen a happy Nausicaan. He couldn't even imagine their tusk-lined mouths being able to form anything resembling a smile.

"That's my associate," she said with an easy smile and stood. "He is my other insurance policy." She took a small step toward him.

"You stay right there," Lif said and backed up half a step himself. "You know you could have gotten us both killed with this crazy stunt you pulled."

She nodded slowly. "I had to know how good you were. I had to be sure you could deal with pressure."

"And what if I hadn't been up to it?"

"I guess we wouldn't be having this conversation," she said, seemingly without a care in the world.

Lif uttered a sarcastic laugh.

"What matters is that you did not disappoint me. We could use a man like you on Eagle, keeping his eyes and ears open and perhaps taking care of some business from time to time. What'd you say?" she

said with her winning smile still plastered on her face. "You know you want to be a spy. It's a world of fun, trust me."

"Yes, I can see that," he said dryly. The truth was that she wasn't too far off the mark with her assertion. He did have a fondness for the spy business, or at least that's what he had thought before he had tried it out. But in the end, it had led to an avoidable death. But he also couldn't ignore the flipside. If he truly did work for Intelligence, perhaps he would be able to do a better job in the future. It was the kind of experience he was sure he could put to good use.

The female shapeshifter could tell that he was torn. "You would be able to stay on Eagle. I know you want your own command someday. Work for us and that just might happen a lot sooner than you think."

His eyes sparkled for a second at the mention of his own command. He was a freshly minted junior lieutenant, it would take many years before he would have the experience and the rank to be offered a command. A little boost could only help. But there was something about this that just didn't feel right. "My friends wouldn't know about this, would they? And I would have to spy on them too, report them even."

She nodded. "There are drawbacks to this line of work. But the benefits far outweigh the downsides," she said like a master salesman.

He considered that for a second. He knew it would mean that he had to lie to his friends, perhaps even betray them. Betray his captain. He couldn't do that. Not for the sake of his career, not for anything. "I'm afraid you've got the wrong man, lady."

"The name is Galven," she said and stepped past him. "And I'll be in touch."

He turned around. "You guys don't take no for an answer, do you?"

She opened the exterior hatch of the shuttle. "I don't believe in finality. Not in this business," she said and threw him a look over her shoulder. "And don't worry about reporting this encounter. We've already taken care of that for you. The good commissioner has been successfully delivered, however, on your way back you were attacked by an unknown enemy and forced to this place to hide. A rescue ship is on its way as we speak."

The hatch had fully extended and she stepped out of the shuttle.

He followed her to the top of the ramp. "And what if I decided to tell them about you? You'll have me taken care of as well?"

Galven looked back and laughed. "You mistake us for the Tal Shiar. Our methods to ensure compliance are of a much more subtle nature. I suggest you do not find out about them. Until the next time, Lif Culsten," she said and disappeared inside the black ship.

The Nausicaan remained, however, his eyes glued on him and Lif suddenly wasn't so sure if their methods really were all that different from the infamous Romulan intelligence service. The giant of a man eventually turned and followed Galven.

Moments later the black ship took off and swiftly disappeared.

Lif returned to the cockpit and let himself fall into the pilot's chair, exhaling deeply. The events of the last twenty minutes had been one unsuspected surprise after another and he needed some time to catch his breath. Everything seemed so strange and distant now, almost as if it had happened to somebody else. But there was no denying it; he had only narrowly avoided death. And for what exactly, he wondered. To prove himself without even knowing it. The idea made him angry.

And Galven had been surprisingly calm about the entire affair as if she had done the exact same thing a thousand times before. Perhaps she had. He was still surprised that she hadn't been more insistent.

And then he thought he understood. She hadn't asked him for anything. Not really. She had already made up her mind about him long before she had set foot onto the shuttle. He was to be an intelligence asset if he wanted to be or not. There never had been any choice to make.

He was not going to be used that easily, he decided, and he would make her know that in no uncertain terms as soon as their paths crossed again. He was under no illusions that they would.

Lif Culsten had plenty of time to ponder exactly how he would handle their next encounter. That rescue ship he had been promised did not arrive for another six hours.

First Trial

September 2371

"I just can't thank you enough, Eli," Doctor Ashley Jane Wenera said as she walked down the corridor of the USS Eagle with her friend and mentor Elijah Katanga at her side.

She had only just come aboard a few hours earlier and was still getting used to being on a starship. Of course, she had been on others but only ever as a passenger. This would mark the first time that she would actually serve on one. And it was all hers. At least as far as the extensive medical facilities of this brand new Nebula-class cruiser were concerned. The ship had not even officially been launched yet and was still securely nestled in its dry dock around Earth orbit.

She had worked hard to get this assignment and in the end, it had been Katanga who had made it possible for her. Katanga was a legend within Starfleet medical circles. He had been around for a very long time and worked with the best and brightest physicians of his time. He had also been her boss at Starfleet Medical's medical assistance agency for the last three years. Together they had traveled the stars, helping countless planetary populations in dire medical distress. She firmly believed that she had learned most of what she knew about medicine and a great number of other things from him.

The old doctor smiled. Katanga, a man who had certainly passed retirement age, seemed to be still as energetic as he had always been. He had slowed down over the years as he had begun to do much more delegating, staying behind at headquarters on Earth, letting his younger doctors like Ashley make the journeys to distant worlds instead. But the African healer still possessed that undeniable sparkle in his eyes that left little doubt that he was not yet ready to leave all the fun and excitement to a new generation.

"Not at all, Jane," he said, as always preferring to use her middle name. "I can't think of anyone who deserves this more than you."

She beamed at his kind words. They meant a lot to her. She adored Elijah Katanga and respected him more than any other individual she had ever met. He had been a strict teacher at first but she had quickly realized that he possessed a true heart of gold.

She had loved her work at the agency but after three years she had wanted to move on to different things. In all her life she had never been good at doing one thing for too long. She had also never been able to stem her desire to travel to new places.

Born and raised in Arizona to Hispanic parents, her family had emigrated to Australia after her sixteenth birthday. She had completed her medical residency in Singapore and afterward, it had become clear to her that she had to see more of the galaxy. Starfleet had seemed the logical choice and after the Academy, she has been quick to join Elijah and his organization.

“The odor is going to take some getting used to.”

Elijah shot her a quizzical expression.

“The ship,” she said quickly. “Not sure if it’s the recycled air or new-starship smell.”

The coal-colored doctor laughed as he led her into her new domain. Eagle’s main sickbay.

Ashley froze in the door frame and smiled like a schoolgirl as she looked over her sickbay for the first time. It was empty at the moment but that didn’t take away from its splendor one little bit. It was sparkly clean and large enough to ensure that she would be able to treat several patients at the same time without tripping over anybody’s feet. Her office was separated from the main ward but allowed her to keep an eye on things through a large window. She had never had her own office before, not to mention an entire deck filled with medical facilities.

“You like it then, I take it?” he said barely containing his joy at seeing the young doctor’s reaction.

“Like it? I love it,” she said and stepped inside, quickly inspecting the many medical devices lining the walls. “I wish I’d had those facilities back on Rengarra III.”

Elijah nodded knowingly. Ashley had only returned from the distant planet a few days earlier where she had successfully helped to eliminate an outbreak of a deadly disease. It had taken two months, thirty-five hundred dead, and too many unsuccessful medical trials to count before a cure was eventually found. He knew that her greatest frustration had been Rengarra’s inadequate medical facilities and the local government’s lack of cooperation. Sadly, not uncommon problems in their line of work.

"Imagine how many lives I could have saved if I'd had a lab like this," she said with a hint of sadness in her voice, as she explored the adjacent medical laboratory.

He stepped behind her and gently put a hand on her shoulder. "Imagine how many lives you will be able to save with a lab like this."

She nodded.

Just then the doors to sickbay opened again and she turned her head with a mixture of anticipation and excitement. She hadn't met any members of her staff yet and she knew that first impressions were always the most important ones.

However, she was surprised when she realized that it wasn't a nurse or a doctor who stepped through the doors but a tall Vulcan man she had met only two hours earlier at an initial crew briefing. His name was Xylion and he was the chief science officer of the ship.

He looked at the empty sickbay and when he spotted the two doctors, he took a surprisingly careful step in their direction.

"Mister Xylion?" she said, hoping that she was pronouncing his name right.

"I believe I require medical assistance," he said slowly and then seemed to lose his balance. He nearly collapsed if it hadn't been for Eli's astonishing speed as he jumped to his side to steady him.

"Easy, Commander," he said and led the Vulcan to one of the biobeds.

Ashley remained stunned for just a short moment longer. She had not expected to have to treat a patient before Eagle had even left the dock. By the time Eli had helped Xylion on the bed she had snapped out of her dazed state, grabbed a medical tricorder, and started to examine the Vulcan.

"What happened?" she said as she studied the results of her scan.

"I am not certain," he said in an unsteady tone. It was obvious that he was in pain, only his meticulously trained Vulcan self-control allowing him to speak at all. "I was performing a routine inventory of our supplies when I suddenly experienced a lack of concentration," he said and lay down on the bed, allowing himself a deep breath.

"Lack of concentration?" Eli asked skeptically. "I'd say you probably fainted and hit your noggin," he added when he noticed the

small bump on Xylion's forehead. He turned to her. "I've yet to meet a Vulcan who doesn't understate their medical condition," he said, cracking a small smile.

She nodded in agreement but her facial expressions remained serious. "The question is what brought on the loss of consciousness?"

The older doctor glanced at Xylion again. "Were you directly exposed to any hazardous materials during your inspection, Commander?"

"No," Xylion said. "All supplies were stored according to safety standards," he said with obvious difficulty.

Ashley reached for a hypo-spray and applied it to his neck. "This is a mild sedative. It should help with the pain. Do you have a history of losing consciousness or having trouble concentrating?"

"No."

"Very well," she said and frowned after looking over her scan results again. "Try to remain still and relax for the time being, I'm sure we'll have you back on your feet in no time."

Xylion nodded curtly and then closed his eyes, probably to begin meditation and focus his energies on countering the pain.

She gestured for Eli to follow her into her office. As they stepped inside, she afforded herself no time to admire her new workplace and instead immediately turned to her mentor. "He's testing positive for a strain of the Alterian avian flu," she said without hesitation.

"You're kidding? Vulcans can't get Alterian influenza."

She handed over her tricorder. "Look for yourself."

He did and began to stroke his short white beard. "I don't believe it."

She looked through the window and at the calm Vulcan lying on the bed in her ward. She couldn't believe it herself. She had been on her new ship for less than five hours and was already faced with a medical mystery. It wasn't exactly how she had imagined her first day.

Elijah lowered the tricorder. "Vulcans cannot contract the disease through conventional means but theoretically they could be infected by a species with a higher than common red hemoglobin count."

She shook her head. "The Alterian flu is not infectious."

“Not entirely true,” he replied. “Once introduced into the host body of a certain species, there is a small chance that it could mutate to become an air-borne retrovirus containing an incomplete Alterian RNA strand.”

“But that would be completely harmless to most races,” she said and then looked back at Xylion. “Except to Vulcans.”

“It could kill him in a matter of days,” he said. He had never much cared for Vulcans as patients, they had a tendency to be extremely difficult, but he didn’t wish this kind of fate on anyone.

Ashley raced to her desk to access her computer only to find what she had already suspected. “There is no known cure for the Alterian flu.”

Elijah nodded sadly. “There never was any reason to have one.”

The young, raven-haired doctor looked up from her screen. “What can we do?”

“I’m not sure if there is much we can do,” he replied. “But protocol demands that we contact Starfleet Medical.”

* * *

“I have a team pick up your patient within two hours,” the middle-aged bureaucrat from Starfleet Medical said. Ashley and Eli had contacted medical headquarters on Earth through the computer on her desk and quickly explained the situation to the officer in charge. He had seemed genuinely disinterested in their story and Ashley had grown continuously more frustrated while explaining the situation to him. She stood and bent down in front of the computer while Eli remained standing tall behind her.

“You misunderstand,” she said. “I’m not requesting a patient transfer.”

“It doesn’t matter if you request it or not, according to regulations we have to transfer every patient suffering from a class-three disease in this system to Starfleet Medical headquarters. We have better facilities here to deal with the case.”

She didn’t care for that response at all. She had no intention of having her first patient transferred off Eagle without even a chance to treat him herself. “We have perfectly good facilities right here, all we need is a bit of time and perhaps some help.”

The administrator shook his head. "From what you've told me you don't have time and we cannot take the chance of you being unsuccessful."

"Lieutenant," Eli began, speaking up for the first time since they had contacted headquarters. "Give my colleague here some credit. She is one of the best physicians I've ever worked with and I'll be able to assist her every step of the way."

The bureaucrat's eyes opened a little wider when he recognized Katanga. There weren't many people working at Starfleet Medical who hadn't heard of the veteran doctor in one form or another. Ashley hoped that her mentor's weight would be enough to sway the protocol stickler.

When he spoke again his voice sounded far more respectful. "I'm very sorry, sir but I cannot make an exception. You are certainly welcome to accompany the patient to our facilities. Please prepare Lieutenant Commander Xylion for transport. Our people will pick him up in two hours. Starfleet Medical out."

His face disappeared from the screen, replaced by the official emblem of the Federation.

"Goddamned pencil pusher."

"I agree with the sentiment, Jane, but it doesn't help us."

She nodded. "We have two hours, is there any chance we can figure this out by then?"

The older doctor stepped to the window of her office to look at the perfectly calm Vulcan. To most eyes, the man looked entirely healthy but he knew better. Xylion was in critical danger. "There are a few things we can tell for certain."

"He can only have contracted the disease from a species with very high red hemoglobin levels but that really doesn't narrow things down much."

The white-haired doctor turned to look straight into her eyes. "There is a very limited number of species who can contract the Alterian flu. Alterians for one of course. They can pass on the virus but if they pass it on to a different species it usually remains dormant."

Eli could practically see the light bulb appear over her head. Without a word, she stormed out of the office and approached Xylion. Elijah followed her.

“Mister Xylion, have you recently been to Alteria or have you interacted with any Alterians?”

His eyes opened up and he responded with no delay. “I have not been to Alteria nor do I recall having met a member of that species within the last three years.”

“That would’ve been too easy,” she said.

“You could have contracted the virus from somebody else who did have contact with Alterians,” Eli said. “It could have been anybody you’ve had contact with in the last twenty-four hours.”

“The only persons I have been in direct contact with within that time frame were members of my science department and the senior officers during the briefing this afternoon.”

Ashley felt a surge of renewed hope as she turned to Elijah. “If we can find the carrier, we could use his or her blood cells to create a vaccine.”

Eli nodded with a smile. She had always been one of his most euphoric physicians and he could see that same zeal in her green eyes now. “You take the senior officers, I’ll track down the science team.”

She nodded and looked back at her patient. “Don’t you worry, Mister Xylion, we’re going to defeat this thing and we’re going to do it right here on this ship,” she said and then turned to Katanga again. “Time’s a-wastin’,” she added and followed Eli out of sickbay.

* * *

Luckily for Xylion, Eagle was still missing more than half of its full crew complement, dramatically decreasing the number of people he could have contracted the virus from.

The air-borne disease could only survive outside of a host body for a very short time which meant that he had to be in close proximity of the carrier. It turned out that only about six members of the science department were likely candidates to be carriers of the virus and only four other senior officers had been at the briefing.

Captain Michael Owens had been the easiest to find. He was in his ready room working on organizing the transfer of the still missing crew members. Ashley didn’t know much about Owens and this had been the first chance she had had to speak to him in private. Elijah had told her that most starship captains had awkward relationships

with their chief medical officers and that they usually made even lousier patients than Vulcans.

But Ashley liked Michael Owens. He certainly seemed to possess the required charisma for a leader and he seemed very competent as a commanding officer. Of course, that had only been her first impression.

"Forgive me doctor but I'm really quite busy. We're still missing essential crew members and are due to launch in a few days," the captain said, hardly even looking up from his desk.

That had not been the reply she had expected and she did little to hide her frustration. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience, sir but I would have thought that the well-being of your crew would be a priority."

Owens suppressed a sigh and looked at her. "From what I understand, Commander Xylion will be transferred to Starfleet Medical for treatment, I didn't think this was your concern anymore."

"If a member of this crew is sick it will always be my concern. And there is a good chance that I can treat him before he is transferred. Wouldn't you rather have a science officer on board when we launch?"

Michael Owens placed the two padds he was holding onto his desk and a contrite smile came over his lips. "I apologize, doctor, you are of course absolutely right. What was your question again?"

She took a small breath and made a mental note to remember that her captain would need some pressure on occasions to be cooperative. Hopefully, it wouldn't be like that all the time, she thought. "Alteria?" she said.

He considered that for a moment then shook his head. "No, never been there, I'm afraid."

"Have you interacted with any Alterians recently?"

"I can't say that I have."

She looked disappointed. "Are you certain?"

"Yes, I am."

She stood. "Thank you for your time, sir," she said and headed for the door.

"Doctor?"

She turned.

“What are his chances?”

“Not good. Not unless I can find where he’s got the virus from,” she said.

Michael nodded. “If you need anything, anything at all, you let me know.”

“I will,” she said and left his office in a hurry.

* * *

She found Lieutenant DeMara Deen in her quarters, dressed in a silky bathrobe. She felt somewhat uncomfortable entering the young woman’s quarters as she seemed to have been preparing to go to bed. Deen had insisted that she entered and Ashley didn’t have the time to wait for a better opportunity.

Deen was a Tenarian, a race she knew very little about. In fact, for a long time, she had believed that they were a purely mythical race. But they were real and they were almost everything she had heard about.

DeMara Deen was probably the most attractive humanoid creature she had ever seen, even though her beauty didn’t seem obvious. Yes, she had attractive features, but her appearance was only half the story. Besides her sparkling purple eyes, she looked indistinguishable from most humans. The woman had an undeniable effect on her, the best way she could describe it to herself was how Deltan pheromones affected people around them. Although the sensation she experienced was very different, almost calming.

“How can I help you, doctor?” she said with a smile once she had stepped into the lieutenant’s quarters.

Ashley still marveled at her young age. She knew she was only twenty years old, not nearly old enough to be a chief operations manager on a ship of the line.

She quickly explained the situation and Deen listened very carefully to every word she said.

“This is awful,” she said when Ashley had finished. “How is Commander Xylion?”

“He isn’t suffering much but it’s hard to tell how much pain he is in exactly. He is not really being very forthcoming about it.”

She nodded slowly. "Well, as for me, I have not been on Alteria but I do have a friend from there."

Renewed hope filled the doctor and she leaned slightly closer.

"In fact, I have a few," she said and smiled.

"That means you could be the carrier. We need to get you to sickbay and synthesize your blood immediately," she said and nearly jumped out of her chair.

"Of course," she said and followed suit. "I feel terrible that I might be the reason for Mister Xylion's condition," she added.

"One last question," Ashley said before she had reached the door. "What's the last time you've talked to any of your Alterian friends?"

"Funny you should ask, I've just talked to Ren'thros yesterday afternoon."

"He is on the ship?"

She shook her head. "We spoke over subspace."

Ashley nodded. "What was the last time you saw him face to face? Any Alterian?"

Deen thought for a moment. "I would say about six weeks ago." She noticed her facial expression darken. "That's outside the incubation window?"

"For a non-Alterian, yes."

"I'm sorry doctor, I hoped it would have been me. That way we could have cured Mister Xylion straight away."

"So did I," Ashley sighed and soon after left her quarters.

* * *

"Xylion?" Lieutenant Commander So'dan Leva said. He stood by the tactical station on the main bridge, his back turned to Wenera. "He's the Vulcan, is he not?"

"I don't see what his race has to do with it."

The tactical officer shrugged. "I didn't say it mattered," he said but still refused to face her. Instead, he continued whatever work he was doing at his station.

Ashely could sense that Leva did seem to have a problem with Xylion, or perhaps with Vulcans in general. It was of course well established that Romulans and Vulcans didn't get along very well but

Leva, from what she understood, was a decorated Starfleet veteran who had lived in the Federation for most of his life. Not the person she expected to suffer from bigotry.

"I would appreciate your help in the matter, Commander," she said with a more insistent tone.

"I don't understand," he said, "you said you're looking for somebody with red blood. You should know that Romulan blood is not."

She stepped next to him to be able to look at his face. "I've read your file. You're half-human which means you have red hemoglobin in your blood. Perhaps not much but probably enough to potentially carry the virus."

"I see."

Ashely sighed with impatience. "So have you been to Alteria or have you met an Alterian recently?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Thank you," she said with little emphasis and began to head for the turbo-lift. "If you should remember otherwise, please let me know as soon as possible. A life might depend on it."

"Certainly," he said so quietly she almost didn't catch it.

* * *

Ashley returned to sickbay without any success. The last person on her list had been chief engineer Louise Hopkins and she had found her working on the warp engines in main engineering. The young engineer had been quite busy but had gladly taken the time to answer all her questions. Unfortunately, she had never even heard of Alteria.

"Please tell me you found somebody?" she said upon seeing Eli back in sickbay.

The older doctor shook his head. "Nothing. You didn't have any luck either, I gather."

She glanced at Xylion. "I've got zip. What's his condition?"

"Worsening."

She felt like smashing something to pieces but fought the urge. "I don't understand this. Somebody must have infected him; that is the only thing that makes sense."

"Perhaps somebody was dishonest with you," he ventured. "You'd be surprised how deceitful people can be. Especially when they talk to their doctor."

"It is possible," she said and remembered how frustrating her conversation with Leva had been. But she couldn't figure out what he could possibly have to gain from lying to her.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the doors to sickbay opened and three people entered. One of them was pushing an anti-grav stretcher.

The only officer among them turned to the two doctors. "Doctor Wenera?"

"Yes."

"We have orders to transport your patient to Starfleet Medical," he said and stuck out a padd. "Please sign this."

She reluctantly took the padd and approved it by pressing her thumb on it. "You're early," she said as she handed it back.

"Traffic was light," the junior officer said with a boyish smile that went unreciprocated. He gestured at the Vulcan on the bed and his two medical technicians began to carefully place Xylion on the stretcher.

Ashley and Eli watched silently as their patient was being removed.

"We will update you on his condition," the officer said as he followed the now-occupied anti-grav gurney out of sickbay. "Have a good day," he added before the doors closed behind them.

"Well, I guess that's that," Eli said.

Ashley wasn't sure if she should feel angry at Starfleet Medical for taking Xylion or at herself for not being able to find a cure in time. All she knew for certain was that she was angry. She looked at the now empty bed. "You can say about the Rengarrian government what you will but they never took a patient away from me."

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then she whipped around. "Aren't the Rengarrians an offshoot of the Alterians?"

Eli seemed to have had the exact same thought at the exact same moment as he quickly reached for an empty hypo and swiftly extracted a small amount of blood from her. They both hurried to the blood synthesizers and placed the sample inside.

"I don't believe it," she said as she saw the results. There was no doubt about it now; she carried the Alterian flu. She had contracted it from the Rengarrians while she had been working on their planet to fight a completely unrelated disease. She had infected Xylion during the briefing.

"It was you all along."

She didn't have time to blame herself. With Eli's help, she quickly separated the damaged RNA strands from her blood cells and then added a series of enzymes to the mix. A procedure that might have taken hours, if not days, with less sophisticated equipment, was completed in a matter of minutes. She tested the finished product on another sample of her blood and observed with satisfaction as it quickly destroyed the infected blood cells. She loaded the vaccine into a hypo and almost ran for the doors.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"If I hurry, I might still be able to catch up with them before they reach the transporter room," she said with slight embarrassment for her highly unorthodox plan. She was certain he was not going to approve.

But he surprised her with his encouraging smile. "Get going then."

She nodded and shot out of the door.

She ran down the corridor as if her own life depended on it. She could not remember ever having been in such a rush before. She cared about nothing else at that moment but to get to Xylion before he was beamed off the ship and ended up outside her sphere of influence.

She knew that she could easily have the vaccine sent to Starfleet Medical and after a series of tests, they would administer it themselves and save Xylion. But this was not just a matter of saving a life anymore. It was also a matter of pride.

Her side ached painfully and she fought for every breath as she made it through one corridor after another. As a physician, she knew she was not doing her body any favors and should have slowed down. Instead, she pressed on faster.

She rounded a corner and ran right into a Tellarite crewman who was coming her way. She lost her balance and stumbled to the

floor while the Tellarite was pushed hard into the bulkhead, a yelp of pain escaping his mouth.

She felt dizzy and had the overwhelming urge to remain sprawled out on the deck. But she couldn't. She collected all her remaining strength, took a deep breath, and struggled back onto her feet.

She quickly checked on the Tellarite. He seemed fine if not slightly dazed. "Sickbay," she managed to verbalize and continued toward the transporter room, tottering at first but then, ignoring the discomfort, quickly returning to a full-out run.

Moments later she stormed into the transporter room.

The anti-grav litter had already been placed on the platform and the accompanying officer turned to look at the physician with surprise. "Doctor Wenera, what's going on?"

"I ... you ... wait," were all the words she could muster. She bent forward, resting her hands on her upper legs and trying to catch her breath. After a few seconds and many expecting glances, she slowly stumbled onto the platform, placed the hypo-spray against Xylion's neck, and emptied it.

"You can't do that," the ensign protested but was too late to stop it.

"Check him," she said slowly and leaned against the bulkhead only to slide down to the floor.

"Doctor, with all due respect, protocol demands —"

"Check him," she repeated, cutting off the ensign.

He looked at her determined visage for a moment and then seemed to decide that the wisest action was to not anger her further. He retrieved a tricorder and scanned Xylion. "It seems the infected blood cells are deteriorating."

She let out a small sigh of relief.

"But this doesn't change anything. I still have my orders."

The doors to the transporter room opened once more, this time to allow Eli entry. "Return the patient to sickbay, Ensign. I'll take full responsibility."

The young officer looked at the renowned physician, considering his options. Elijah not only outranked him but also held much sway at Starfleet Medical. Given the situation, he decided the

wisest course of action would be to follow the man's orders. He gestured for his people to turn around.

Xylian moved his head slightly to look at Ashley when the stretcher passed by her. "Thank you, doctor," he said almost inaudibly.

She nodded curtly just before a wide smile came over her lips.

Eli stepped up next to her. "It's good to see that I have not yet outlived my usefulness entirely," he said and held out an arm for her.

"You'll outlive us all," she said and then took his arm to be pulled to her feet with surprising strength. She offered him a quizzical look.

"Eating right and regular exercise is not to be underrated," he said. "You should try it if you plan on sprinting across the ship on regular occasions."

"I was hoping that most of my work would involve far less physical effort," she said with a grin and slowly walked back to the exit with him at her side.

"On a starship, you'll never know what to expect, my dear," he said as they stepped out of the transporter room. "The challenge comes from never quite knowing what to expect. For me, that's always been the fun part of practicing medicine on a starship probing the depths of the unknown."

"You sound nostalgic," she said. "Perhaps you should consider taking up one more challenge yourself."

He smiled. "I just might. But I wouldn't be able to keep up with you, that much seems certain. As for your first challenge, I think you passed it with flying colors."

Love's Battleground

May 2373

This story takes place a few weeks after the conclusion of Eternal Flame

Killing was easy.

It had never been particularly difficult for her. While young girls on most other worlds had started to worry about their hair and clothes, Nora Laas had learned how to operate a phaser. More importantly, she had learned how to use it to kill. It had taken her long at all to become extremely proficient at disposing of Cardassians and not only with the use of an energy weapon.

Some twenty years later, the strawberry-blond Bajoran found herself many lightyears away from the place where she had learned her skills, crawling across the underbrush on a nameless planet, on her way to do what she did best.

A bright moon was her only source of light but more than enough to illuminate her targets. The group of skeleton-faced aliens had not spotted her yet.

Laas had waited for hours to find an ideal spot to ambush them and had finally been rewarded when the four soldiers had decided to make camp by the remains of a building by an exposed clearing. Patience was the hallmark of every guerilla fighter and she possessed ample amounts when in combat.

She found a slightly elevated spot that gave her a perfect vantage point of her targets. Their bony heads made them appear fierce, down-right sinister, and she had little trouble imagining them as blood-thirsty Cardassians.

Much of this situation seemed familiar. In her younger days, laying an ambush like this had been a regular occurrence, although she had rarely been alone.

Sometimes her sister Leena had been at her side while others were hiding nearby, closing off any possible escape routes.

She didn't miss those times, she didn't miss the Resistance, the constant fighting and running, and the dread of never feeling safe. She did, however, miss Leena. She missed her a great deal.

She had been the only family she had ever really known. She had never met her parents and knew only that they had been imprisoned in a Cardassian labor camp and had managed to smuggle both her and her sister out when she was just a baby. She had never been able to find out which of the many camps her parents had been confined to and it hadn't been due to her lack of trying.

All she knew for sure was that her only connection to them had died when Leena did. She had sacrificed herself so that she could escape Bajor, trying to find a better life somewhere else.

Laas gripped her *mek'leth* tighter and drew it close to her prone body. The Klingon sword was just one of the many melee weapons she was intimately familiar with. She felt a slight tingle in her stomach in anticipation of battle. She didn't really like to fight but she knew that she was too good at it not to. Back then and even now, others depended on her being an efficient killer.

Fighting had another important advantage.

It didn't allow her to think.

Not while her mind was entirely focused on the task. And once the battle was joined, instinct kicked in, seamlessly augmenting her skills and her experience, turning her into a near-unstoppable killing machine.

The alien closest to her turned from her hiding spot and she knew instantly that the moment to act had come.

Within a second, she was on her feet, keeping her body low and partially hidden in the high grass surrounding her, she stormed forward. She held her weapon with the blade turned backward to keep it untangled from the underbrush.

And then she was behind the skeleton man, bringing the razor-sharp *mek'leth* up in one swift motion, she severed his skull-like head with what appeared to be a minimal amount of effort.

She didn't pause to confirm the kill. There was no need.

She dropped to the ground noiselessly only to come up right next to the second warrior who had only just begun to turn her way.

Her blood-soaked blade tore through his legs and the warrior hauled in pain before losing his balance and dropping like a sack of dead tribbles.

Laas knew exactly where the third alien would be. She swung the blade without even looking at her target and noted with satisfaction as she felt the sword tear through fabric and flesh.

The soldier slid off the blade and collapsed to the ground.

Laas stood and looked sharply to her right. But her fourth and final enemy was not where her mind's eye had placed him.

She heard footsteps fall behind her. She cursed herself. How could she have been so careless as to him surprise her? She knew that she was not going to make it, that by the time she turned, the alien would surely have made his move and struck her down.

Giving up was not in her DNA, and she brought up her weapon in a swift motion.

"Wait!"

Her target had not been the one she had expected. Instead of an expressionless skull head, her blade was targeting the pretty face of a blonde woman in her late twenties.

She aborted the fatal strike just in time to avoid cutting off her shoulder-length hair and possibly her neck along with it.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Laas gasped in-between taking heavily-labored breaths. She hadn't come here to talk.

"I'm looking for you," the other woman said. She was about to continue when something else captured her attention, her eyes opening wide.

Laas knew instantly why. He was behind her, this time there was no doubt about it. She never got a chance to face her enemy.

"Computer, freeze program," the newcomer said.

Their murky surroundings instantly paused. The trees stopped swaying, the distant crickets stopped chirping but most noticeably, the imposing warrior behind Laas had frozen midway through what looked very much like a killing blow.

"That was close," the woman wearing a mustard-colored Starfleet uniform said as she rounded Laas and inspected the petrified soldier behind her.

She shrugged and walked toward the staircase of the ruins surrounding them. "It wouldn't have been if you hadn't shown up."

Louise Hopkins was too preoccupied studying the physical appearance of the frozen soldier to notice the tone of annoyance in

her friend's voice. "Who are these guys? They look positively diabolical."

"I just found this program the other day. Klingon calisthenics program, not a bad challenge on the higher difficulty levels" she said and sat on the stairs. The battle had taken the air out of her lungs. She looked back at Louis who was still studying the seemingly lifeless form of her attacker.

Louise was her best friend on Eagle and had been ever since they had been roommates at the Academy. Most people who knew about their friendship couldn't help but wonder how two people so different from each other could be such good friends.

One, an emotional and outspoken Bajoran who had known war for most of her life, the other, a shy and introverted wunderkind engineer who had never left Federation space.

"You still haven't told me why you're looking for me."

Eagle's young chief engineer tore her attention away from the intimidating figure. "The real question is: Why are you hiding?"

"I'm not hiding," she said and focused on the Klingon sword in her hand, deciding that it needed most of her attention.

"Oh really?" she said in a mocking tone.

Laas stood and walked away. "It's called exercise, Lou. Maybe give it a try sometime."

"You're telling me you forgot all about your date?"

Laas froze but kept her back turned to her friend. No, she hadn't forgotten at all. She was painfully aware that she was supposed to meet Eugene Edison. And she had wanted to as well. After all, it had been her idea that they would meet for dinner.

Her relationship with Eagle's first officer, if one could call it that, had started after she had finally realized her true feelings for him during their last mission. He had been critically injured while they had been on an away mission together and had come close to losing his life at her side while she had been reduced to watching him helplessly. Right then and there she knew that she would not be able to bear losing him.

Gene seemed to reciprocate her feelings and they had embarked on a rather slow and awkward series of dates and innocent flirtations that had seemed to be leading them nowhere.

"It wasn't really a date," she finally said without turning to face her. She couldn't manage to look her in the eye.

But Louise was not going to let her get away with it. She took a few determined steps closer to her. "Laas, who are you trying to fool? I know how you feel about him. But this thing will never work if all you do is avoid him."

She sighed. "I just don't know how to do this, Lou, okay?" she said and turned around. "I don't know where to start. I don't know what to do or how to do it. The whole thing is just very frustrating to me."

Louise started to laugh much to her friend's displeasure which she expressed with an icy glare.

"I'm sorry, Laas," she said quickly. She looked over the dead and disabled bodies of her ferocious attack. "You're telling me you can take care of a horde of vicious killing machines but you cannot face the man you are in love with?"

"It's pathetic, I know."

Louise placed her arm around her shoulder and led her toward the exit. This was new to her. A role reversal of sorts. She had become much more used to her headstrong friend taking her by the hand and helping her through difficult challenges.

"I guess there's a first for everything," she said with a smile as they both left the holodeck behind.

* * *

"The new warp core intermix formula has increased electro-plasma flow levels by two point six percent and has significantly improved the dilithium degeneration rate. The magnetic conduits and plasma injectors are now running at ninety-eight point eight percent efficiency which has allowed us to push the field coils in both nacelles beyond their design tolerance levels."

Commander Eugene Edison listened carefully to the chief engineer's report. But as much as he wanted to, his mind could not focus on what she had to say. It was too preoccupied with the woman sitting right next to Louise Hopkins.

The other department heads attending the regular morning briefing had seemed oblivious to the fact that the first officer had

tried to make eye contact with security chief Nora Laas since the briefing had started while she had made great efforts to avoid it.

Gene couldn't understand why.

He couldn't quite get his head around why she was choosing to avoid him, going as far as calling off a date she had suggested. He did not doubt his feelings toward the fiery Bajoran and he knew that she felt the same. After the end of their last mission, they had started to truly enjoy each other's company. They had even spent an entire night together, talking until the morning hours about anything and everything.

Gene soon realized that Laas had never had a meaningful and intimate relationship before. Yes, there had been the occasional fling in her past but generally, she had never had the time, or perhaps allowed herself the time, to pursue a lasting relationship.

She certainly didn't have much of an opportunity to do so when she had been on Bajor, fighting the Cardassians on a near-daily basis. Later, at the Academy, when most young cadets experienced their first more involved attempts at relationships, she had usually retreated to libraries and study halls to catch up on the academic shortcomings she had desperately needed to catch up on, due to her unconventional childhood.

After graduation, she dedicated herself to her career. First as a marine, continuing what she was best at; fighting Cardassians, and then joining Starfleet's security division.

Gene on the other hand was no stranger to relationships, both the ups and the downs. But Laas, he felt, was a person he could see himself caring for more than any other woman he had ever known. He couldn't quite tell why that was. Perhaps because of the deep scars she carried with her. Or maybe because she was the toughest person he had ever known and yet longed for somebody she could be vulnerable with. Gene wanted to be that man for her.

"Commander?"

He quietly chastised himself for having his thoughts catch him off guard. He looked at Hopkins and gave her a small smile to convince her that he had listened to every word she had said. "Good, very good. What's the overall performance increase we can expect from the latest modification?"

“At least point six four cochranes. Possibly more but we won’t know for sure until we’ve run some more simulations,” she said.

Gene nodded. “Well, let’s do that then,” he said and stood from the chair at the head of the conference table. “That be all for now. Thank you.”

The other officers quickly stood and filed for the two exits.

“Lieutenant Nora, could I have a quick word with you before you leave.”

She stopped and looked at him with surprise. Or was it panic? He couldn’t be sure.

“Actually, I have a meeting with Louise,” she said quickly and looked at the chief engineer with almost pleading eyes.

“That’s all right, Laas,” she said with a warm smile. “We can meet later,” she added.

Gene could tell that that was not the response Laas had hoped for and the cold stare directed at her long-time friend was ample proof.

Hopkins seemed unperturbed and followed the others out of the room, leaving Laas alone with him.

Gene slowly rounded the table, approaching her carefully. “I waited for you last night.”

She nodded slowly and couldn’t quite hide the guilty look in her eyes.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, Laas. I thought you wanted this as much as I did. And now you suddenly seem so distant, almost as if you are developing second thoughts.”

She looked right into his eyes. “I’m not.”

“Then what is it? I do understand if you want to take things slow and I think I’ve been patient. We both have. But you need to give me something.”

She turned to look out of the windows of the observation lounge. A small sigh escaped her lips. “I just need a little bit more time, Gene, please. My feelings have not changed. Not one little bit.”

He took a small step toward her. He was close enough to touch her and he wanted to. But he knew this was not the right time. “But what, Laas? Whatever it is, you can talk to me about it.”

She turned to face him. “That’s just it. I can’t. Don’t ask me why but I just can’t.”

He sighed and his shoulders slumped visibly.

“Please don’t give up on me.”

He gave her an encouraging smile. “Never.”

And then she simply slid past him and dashed for the exit like an injured animal, retreating from its predator.

Gene watched her leave without a word. He realized then and there that Nora Laas, the fighter, the warrior, the survivor, would not ever make the first move. If he wanted her, he had to fight for her.

* * *

She was mad as hell and she let out her frustration on dozens of soulless soldiers, consisting out of nothing more than light and shadow.

Armed with two mek’leth’s, one in each hand, she fought herself through a field of skull-faced opponents. It was not unlike a ballet of death as she practically danced through their ranks, jumping, crouching, sliding, and spinning, ultimately they all fell to her feet.

She wasn’t hiding, she told herself as she disposed of yet another enemy. Not this time. This time she was simply here to let out her frustration the only way she knew how. She didn’t know why it was so difficult for her to open up to Gene. He was a wonderful man, he really was. He truly did understand her and there weren’t many who did. Especially not men. And she knew something else. She knew it without a doubt in her heart.

She loved him.

As her mind wandered, her fighting technique started to suffer. The enemy around her began to change tactics. Even though they were nothing more than computer creations, they did have the capabilities to learn. They noticed their organic opponent’s lack of focus and began to work together to exploit it.

Laas had not seen this coming.

Two of the warriors attacked in unison, bringing down their razor-sharp blades in one swift motion. She deflected in time but the impact caused her to lose her grasp on one of her] swords. It dropped to the ground and she tumbled backward.

A third soldier darted forward from her blind spot.

Laas had gotten herself out of tighter spots than this one. With her now free hand, she caught the attacking man's sword-wielding wrist and quickly twisted it behind his back. She heard bones crack as she held him in front of her like a shield. She pushed him hard toward his approaching comrades. Except for now, they had quadrupled in number. Her quick move had taken out two of them but another six remained and they continued bearing down on her. And the maneuver had cost Laas her only remaining weapon.

She felt a sudden flash of panic when she realized that she had been backed into a corner. Without weapons and clearly outnumbered it looked like she had lost. To computer-controlled marionettes. And all that because she had allowed herself to become distracted. It was almost unforgivable.

A battle cry ripped through the air and seconds later two of the approaching soldiers fell. The others turned to locate the new threat. It was all she needed. She charged forward and twisted one of their necks before helping herself to the dead man's sword.

"Need a hand?" Gene said with a smirk. He was dressed in full combat gear and had a tight grip on very deadly Vulcan lipra.

Laas didn't have time to respond as the remaining soldiers had recovered and were scrambling to deliver a finishing blow. She was faster, however. She parried easily and dished out a deadly response.

Out of the corner of her eye, she admired how well Gene carried himself in battle. She knew he was a decent shot with a phaser but she had not known that he knew how to handle himself in melee combat.

Moments later they both found each other again. This time back-to-back, surrounded by the few remaining warriors.

"Come here often?" she said between breaths. This battle had gone on longer than she had anticipated.

"First time, I've had the pleasure."

"What'd you think?"

"Love the scenery. The natives, not so much."

Laas nodded. Without another word, both of them engaged at the same time. Their skull-faced opponents didn't stand a chance.

Gene's long lipra was ideal for cutting down enemies at some distance but it didn't work so well when the opponent was at arm's length and he quickly found himself forced into a defensive posture.

She noticed and after cutting down her last opponent, she easily disposed of his foe as well, leaving them both out of breath and out of aliens to fight.

He lowered his weapon. "Nicely done, thanks."

"Don't mention it."

"This was quite exhilarating," he said as he leaned against a dead tree trunk to try and catch his breath.

"Is that why you came down here?"

"I had to see for my own eyes what has been keeping you so busy lately."

"Gene."

"I know," he said, interrupting her, "you need time." Still breathing hard, he forced himself to stand upright again, wiping the sweat off his dirty face. "I just wanted to tell you. I'll give you all the time you need, Laas. If that is what it takes."

He looked at her but she didn't respond. She just stood there, frozen, surrounded by a field of fake dead aliens. He turned and started for the exit.

Only then did Laas notice that not all of the skull-faced warriors were slain. One of them still moved. It was making one last attempt to go for his sword. But he was too far away to hope to do any damage. When the soldier raised his hand, she realized her mistake. It wasn't a sword at all. It was a phaser and it was pointed straight at Gene.

"Look out!"

He turned.

She ran and leaped forward.

The phaser discharged.

Laas high-tackled Gene to the ground just as she felt the whirl of an energy beam so close to her head, she thought she felt the heat of it singe her hair.

She glanced back at the soldier but firing the phaser had been his last ever act.

"You didn't have to do that."

She looked down at Gene now lying below her. Without a second thought, she leaned down and kissed him passionately.

He offered no resistance.

“All it took was for you to save my life,” he said after the kiss, hinting at the fact that he had never been in real danger thanks to the safety protocols of the holodeck.

“Why don’t you just shut up and kiss me?”

A wide smile crept onto his lips. He was happy to oblige.

Siren's Curse

February 2365

Eduardo Joyce was a charming, handsome, and caring kind of guy. He was both considerate and had a rough and exciting side to him that made him a lot of fun to be around with.

The same was true for Giuseppe Pelgrini who, in addition to being quite easy on the eyes, was also a wonderful listener.

Ayo Ubkendu, born and raised in the heart of the United States of Africa, possessed the most fascinating knowledge about his home's native flora and fauna. He also had a certain ruggedness that gave proof to the fact that he had spent most of his life exploring the wilderness.

Sraxor Tadomm on the other hand was mostly an indoor man. A poet, painter, and performing artist all rolled into one, his imagination seemingly knew no bounds.

Besides being incredibly fascinating individuals, these four young men all had another thing in common. They loved spending time with freshman cadet DeMara Deen, preferably alone. And the list did not end there and was not limited to one sex either.

DeMara had the spirit of an adventurer, why else would she have decided to leave her isolated home world and come to Starfleet Academy? Experiencing new places and new people was what she lived for and so it was rock-climbing in Utah with Eduardo on Wednesday, exploring the canals of Venice, Italy with Guiseppe on Thursday, an exploratory safari in Kenya on Friday while spending all Saturday with Sraxor in the mountains of New Zealand where a magnificent landscape helped inspire his latest work.

And her social calendar didn't stop there. Besides these types of excursions, she also had to fit in several other extracurricular activities she had either volunteered for or which she felt she was obligated to attend.

As the only member of her race in Starfleet and one of the very few representing her people to the Federation, she was part of the Starfleet Cultural Exchange program, attending lectures and talks

where she acted as an unofficial Tenarian ambassador, but also learned about and connected with the many other people that made up the Federation.

She welcomed all of it.

In short, DeMara was having the most exciting time of her life.

The downside to all the fun and her activities, however, was the fact that her academic grades had started to take a serious hit.

Like many Tenarians she had spent most of her childhood studying the sciences but now, after only a few months at the Academy, she was in danger of failing exobiology. On the coming Wednesday, she would be having an important exam in advanced quantum physics and while she had scored near the top in the initial placement tests, she was worried now. She hadn't even had a chance to look at the required reading yet.

It was late Saturday night and she was still exhausted from her hike across New Zealand's Mount Aspiring National Park when she finally got the chance to catch up with her studies. Her roommate had gone to sleep and she sat all by herself at her desk, several pads sprawled out in front of her.

Her computer announced an incoming message and she quickly activated it. She was greeted by the smiling face of Zessia Sh'vakrarh. The blue-skinned Andorian seemed in high spirits and she mirrored her smile. "Zess? How are you?"

"Good, good," she swiftly replied. "I'm so happy I got in touch with you. I was worried you might have gone to sleep already."

"Not yet," she said and fought back a yawn.

"I have great news," she continued with all too obvious enthusiasm. "You remember how I told you that my uncle has a beach house out in Saint-Tropez?" She didn't wait for a reply. "Well, I managed to get it for all day tomorrow."

"That is great but I already promised Giuseppe that we'll go see Florence tomorrow."

"Oh," was her only reply, her blue antennae dropped noticeably.

She noticed her disappointment right away. "But wait? Italy and France are not that far from each other, right? Maybe we could all go together?"

The Andorian cadet slightly shook her head. "I don't really know Earth geography. Besides, there isn't really enough space for more than two in my uncle's house," he said, her eyes no longer focused on the screen.

"How about Monday then? I don't have any plans. None that I cannot change that is."

"Really?" Zessia said, once again filled with élan.

"Sure," she replied with a beaming smile.

"That'll be great. I promise you won't regret it, Dee. See you Monday."

The transmission ended and her forehead dropped onto the top of her desk in a mixture of exhaustion and frustration.

She was going to fail advanced quantum physics.

* * *

DeMara had been well aware of the challenges she would have to face when she left Tenaria to come to Earth. Her world had enjoyed centuries of peaceful isolation and while Tenarians had always possessed knowledge of other races traveling the stars, the outside world had for the most part only known of them through rumors, which had elevated them to near mythical status.

Tenarian's effect on most humanoid species was usually the same. They found themselves inexplicitly attracted to them and it was not just because of her natural charisma or physical beauty. She was a magnet for attention whether she wanted to be or not. People of all races enjoyed her company, simply felt comfortable, and satisfied just being around her.

It was not sexual either. Most men she had met had been too respectful to even insinuate the possibility and DeMara had made the firm decision to draw the line when it came to intimacy. But that didn't mean she was any less popular on campus. At first, all the attention she had been getting was like an adventure for her. But now she had come to a sad realization. She couldn't handle it. And it wouldn't go away, either. For the first time since leaving home, she wondered if perhaps it had been a mistake coming to Earth.

She knew she wasn't completely alone with her troubles. There was at least one other species, a Federation member even, that was equally prone to being chased after due to their physiology.

She had noticed that the Deltans who attended the Academy liked to stick to their kind in their free time. As the only Tenarian in Starfleet, she could not follow that same example. Instead, she had decided to make friends with them. It had been an easy task for her.

"I just don't understand how you do it?" she said to the three Deltans she sat with for lunch.

"It isn't always easy," Anara Rysyl, the third-year cadet, explained. Like her two kinsmen, she was entirely bald and yet it only added to their undeniable charm. Even DeMara had to admit that she found herself slightly enchanted by the three Deltans.

"There are ways for us to lessen our impact on other races, however," Anara's friend continued, which quickly garnered her an annoyed glance from Rysyl.

DeMara nodded knowingly. Differently from her, Deltans produced strong pheromones that were the main cause for their attractiveness to others. Most Deltans who entered Starfleet were required to pledge an oath of celibacy or take injections to suppress the pheromones. She also knew that Anara didn't think much of those alleged remedies.

"It ... it would be a shame if ... if you decided to leave the Academy," said Jonar Arik, the third and only male member of the group. He had a slight stutter that he had not been able to overcome but besides that, he was no less intriguing than the other Deltans. In fact, it might have made him even more fascinating.

She smiled at him. "Thanks, Jonar but you see there is no simple solution for me. No injections I could take and no—"

"You don't need any injections," Anara cut her off. "You will always attract attention no matter where you go, it's your nature. It's who you are and you just have to come to terms with it. You wouldn't ask a Klingon to stop hunting or a Vulcan not to think. It's in your nature. Besides, what's the alternative? Stay hidden away on Tenaria for the rest of your life?"

She considered that for a moment. "Most of my people do just that."

The Deltan girl nodded. "But not you. Look around, Dee," she said and gestured at the cafeteria filled with dozens of aliens from all over the galaxy. "The ones who come here cannot be bound by living on just one planet. We've joined Starfleet because we feel the need to see more, to experience more. That's why you're here. You'll never be truly happy if you give up now and go back home."

"DeMara! Dee!"

She looked up to find the source of the voice intruding into their conversation. She quickly found it. Three cadets were making their way through the cafeteria and toward her table. They were led by Nicholas Locarno, a tall and handsome fair-haired young man, All-Federation athlete, and proud member of the Academy's distinguished Nova squadron flying corps. "We've been looking for you all over the place," he said as they stepped up to the table.

"Well, you found me," she said with a smile.

"There's something we got to show you."

"Right now?"

He nodded insistently. "Yeah." And then looked at the two Deltan women also at the table. "You're welcome to come, too?"

Anara's smile was no less sweet than DeMara's had been. "Maybe next time."

Locarno nodded and then practically dragged DeMara away from the table. She barely had a chance to say goodbye before she was swept toward the exit.

Anara looked after her. "She really needs to learn how to say no. Otherwise, I fear she'll never make it."

Jonar nodded, his eyes focused on the departing Tenarian. "It ... it would be a shame if she didn't. I ... I like her."

Anara turned to look at him with a grin.

"Wh ... What?"

* * *

It turned out that what Locarno and his friends wanted to show her had required them to travel to the Pacific island of Hawai'i, where they had remained until late in the night.

The next morning DeMara had received the sternest reprimand from a professor for skipping a class she had ever experienced. She

had felt so devastated that by midday she had decided that she had enough. She was back in her dorm room and she was packing.

“Knock, knock.”

She turned to see Michael Owens standing in the open door. Even though he was an associated tutor at the Academy and old enough to be her father, Michael was her best friend. He had been part of the crew of the Fearless, the first Starfleet ship to discover her planet three years earlier and he had stayed behind to develop an official rapport between the Tenarians and the Federation.

They had quickly found a liking to each other and after two years he had finally given in to her request to train her to be a Starfleet officer. When Michael left Tenaria and was offered a temporary position at the Academy, she had followed along to continue her training. Besides being a good friend, he also served as her academic advisor.

“Michael,” she said with a smile that wasn’t quite as brilliant as it used to be. “Come in.”

“You’re supposed to say: ‘Who’s there?’” he said as he stepped into her room.

She looked at him with confusion. “But I already know it’s you.”

He sighed. “I see my efforts to teach you the nuances of human humor have yet to bear fruit,” he said and then looked around the room. “A bit early in the semester to take a vacation, don’t you think?”

The smile disappeared from her face. “I’m going home, Michael.”

He nodded slowly. “So I heard.”

She didn’t quite know what to say. She knew that Michael should have been the first person she should’ve told about her decision. But she hadn’t been able to bring herself to do that. She hated the idea of disappointing him.

He walked across the room. “When does your ship leave?”

“My ship?”

“How else where you planning on getting back to Tenaria? It’s a two-month trip and as far as I know, no regular transports are going that way.”

She found herself dumbfounded. "I hadn't really thought about that yet."

"I see," he said and found an empty chair to sit in.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?" he said innocently.

"Pretending that everything is fine and that you're going along with what I want to do. We both know you came here to talk me out of this. But you won't be able to. Not this time," she said with an almost uncharacteristic insistence.

"I wouldn't dream of talking you out of this, Dee. If this is what you want to do then you should do it. After all, I know you," he said calmly. "You're not the kind of person who makes rash and irrational decisions. You think things through."

She nodded quickly. "That's right," she said and went back to packing. But she soon stopped herself and looked back at her friend. "I just can't handle this anymore. Everybody wants me all the time. All I do around here is be everybody's best friend and to be honest, it's all too much. I came here to study and learn to be a Starfleet officer. How can I do that if I don't even have time to read a single book?"

"It's a problem," he said.

"I know what you're going to say next."

He raised an eyebrow in Vulcan fashion.

"I'm not the first cadet who had to adapt to a new lifestyle and a new environment. I know that. And I was perfectly willing to be flexible and adjust. And please don't bring up the Deltans."

"I wasn't going to."

"They had over a century to accommodate to the way they influence other species around them. How am I supposed to do that in just a few months? It's impossible."

"I guess you're right."

She simply stared at him. "Are you just going to sit there or will you be saying anything useful any time soon?"

He stood and walked back to the door. "I don't see the point. It seems you have made up your mind about this. If you need me to be useful, I'll see if I can arrange a transport for you."

"Thanks," she said, suddenly a little unsure of herself.

Before he had reached the door, he turned to face her once more. "The only thing I will say is this: It's easy to blame everybody else for your problems but perhaps it is worth looking at yourself for a change," he said and left.

"What is that supposed to mean?" But Michael was already gone.

* * *

The best Michael had been able to do for her was to secure her passage on a long-range freighter that would leave toward the sector of space Tenaria was located in. The ship, however, would not leave for another week and DeMara had decided to keep her departure under wraps and continue to attend classes as if nothing was the matter.

"She's going with me tonight," Giuseppe said.

"I don't think so," said Ayo Ubkendu forcefully. "We had plans to visit Madagascar for weeks now."

"That's ridiculous," the Italian countered. "You can go there anytime you want. But the Carnival of Venice happens only once a year."

DeMara was barely listening to the two men fighting over her. She had stopped caring now that she was so close to leaving the Academy. But she felt a sudden sense of regret as well. It had been her dream since early childhood to see more of the galaxy and when Michael and Starfleet had come across her world that dream had suddenly become a very real possibility. She didn't want to give up on it, certainly not because she was getting more attention than she could handle.

She spotted the Deltans standing across the large Academy hallway. It was always easy to spot the Deltans. Anara and her girlfriend were involved in conversation but Jonar was looking right at her. He blushed slightly and diverted his gaze when he realized that she was looking back at him.

She stood and began to walk across the hall.

"Dee, where you going?" Giuseppe said, looking after her.

"I'll be right back."

"H ... Hi Dee," Jonar said as she approached.

"Listen," she started. "I know this is kind of sudden but I've heard about this great restaurant in the city and I was wondering if you would like to go and have dinner with me there tonight?"

Jonar didn't reply while Anara and her friend fixed her with surprised looks.

"I understand if you don't want to."

"N ... No," he said.

She nodded slowly, her expression darkening.

"I ... I mean, no, I would love ... to go have dinner with you tonight."

She beamed. "Great, I see you tonight then?"

Jonar nodded and mirrored her smile.

She leaned into him and kissed him on the lips. "I can't wait," she added and walked away.

She didn't notice Jonar turning a deep shade of red. "Neither can I," he replied quietly and stutter-free.

Anara looked incredulous. "Well, that I didn't see coming."

"Dee?" Ayo asked with utter surprise as she strode past him.

She shot him and Giuseppe a quick smile. "I'm sorry, boys," she said without halting. "I have a date tonight."

DeMara continued down the hallway at a determined pace. She had made her decision. She was going to stay at the Academy and she would have a boyfriend. If that would allow her to focus more on her studies, only time would tell.

Author's Note:

The character Anara Rysyl used courtesy of David Falkayn and is part of his *Star Trek: Sutherland* fan-fiction series. For more on Rysyl and *Sutherland* please visit the United Trek website at <http://www.unitedtrek.org>.

Incompatibility

June 2373

This story takes place a few weeks after the conclusion of Eternal Flame and after the events of Love's Battleground.

It was all rather childish but that didn't stop her from finding amusement in watching the games that Laas and Gene Edison were playing with each other. Apparently, they had decided to keep their relationship a secret for now and even avoided being seen together in public as much as possible.

Louise of course knew about them. She was the Bajoran's best friend on Eagle and had been instrumental, or at least that's what she told herself, in bringing the two together.

She sat alone at a table in the lounge area of The Nest, Eagle's foremost place for rest and relaxation, and had been watching both the Bajoran security chief as well as first officer for the past fifteen minutes.

They both sat at opposite ends of the lounge, seemingly involved in entirely different conversations with entirely different people. And yet every so often they would make eye contact, and a small smile would creep on each of their lips before they quickly turned back to pretend that they were entirely focused on the people they were sitting with.

LaA excused herself from her friends and headed for the bar alongside the far wall of the Nest. A couple of minutes later, Edison did the same. He stepped up right next to where she had taken a stool, quickly finished his drink, and then left the lounge seemingly without having exchanged more than two words with the security officer.

Another couple of minutes passed before Laas stood and hastily headed for the exit as well. Louise smiled knowingly.

It was all rather silly, she decided and turned back to the large padd she had brought with her and the reason she had come here in the first place.

The screen displayed a technical blueprint of Eagle's main engineering deck. All the usually hidden conduits and manifolds were highlighted. Ever since she and her team had started to use a new, more efficient warp core intermix formula, system diagnostics had shown an increased discrepancy in electro-plasma flow levels on deck twenty-four.

At the moment the irregularity was still within tolerance levels but it was steadily rising and eventually would lead to a failure of the entire EPS distribution grid throughout that deck and quite possibly all over the ship. She had to find the source of the problem quickly before Eagle would come in danger of suffering a catastrophic power failure.

She had decided to meet up with Lieutenant Commander Xylion, chief science officer, to get to the root of the problem.

Lou didn't say it much but she admired the tall Vulcan greatly. He had a razor-sharp mind but like most of his people, he lacked interpersonal skills. He had come a long way since first arriving on Eagle two years ago, she thought. He was still a rather private man, usually preferring the solitude of his quarters to more social places like the Nest but he had begun to inspire more confidence in the men and women who served with him.

"Lieutenant."

Louise looked up from her technical diagrams and smiled broadly. "Xylion. Take a seat."

He sat down opposite the much younger engineer.

"How are you?" she said, still smiling at him.

He seemed to consider the question for a short moment before he replied. "Well." His facial features remained unchanged, however, and didn't betray the fact that he thought the question to be entirely redundant. But he had learned that it was a question humans were fond of asking, usually expecting a reply such as the one he had just given.

"That's great. Would you like a drink?" she said and gestured to her kava juice that sat in front of her. "I can get you something if you like."

"That will not be necessary, Lieutenant. You have indicated that you require my assistance."

She nodded quickly and slid the large padd across the table. "I just can't make sense of these readings and I thought maybe a pair of fresh eyes would help."

She watched him carefully as he began to study the diagrams. She couldn't deny that she felt herself strangely attracted to the dark-haired Vulcan and not just because of the man's keen intellect.

She had first realized that she held more than a professional admiration for him when they had teamed up a month earlier to successfully repel a mercenary attack on Eagle. A group of pirates had taken the ship by utter surprise and taken hold of main engineering. She and Xylion had been able to slip into an adjacent room undetected and had eventually come up with a plan to take back the engine room.

She still remembered how frustrated she had felt at first by being forced out of what she considered her natural domain. But more than that, she recalled how well she had worked with him and the exhilaration she had felt when their plan had finally come together and they had regained control.

Xylion had been uncharacteristically open to her suggestions and she wanted to believe that it had been more than professional courtesy.

"Interesting."

The sudden exclamation brought the engineer back into the present. "What do you think?"

"It would appear the electro-plasma distribution levels are directly linked to the change of the intermix formula."

She nodded. "Yes. But how is that possible? The formula is way inside tolerance levels. It shouldn't change flow consistency."

"Indeed," he said and continued to study the padd.

She understood that any relationship with a Vulcan would encounter obvious challenges. After all, they didn't believe in showing any emotions and preferred a lifestyle based on pragmatism. But whoever said that she needed an emotional relationship, anyway? She thrived on working with machines after all and she had always preferred the simplicities of dealing with computers as opposed to the many quirks and inconsistencies sentient beings were so prone to.

Xylion looked up from the diagram and straight into her bright blue eyes. For a moment she flushed. Had he realized her ulterior motive for asking him here?

“Have you attempted to lower overall core output levels?”

“Up to thirty-five percent,” she said a little bit too quickly. “No change.”

Xylion nodded and returned his attention to the padd.

Louise had wanted to gauge the seemingly minuscule chances that the Vulcan might have similar feelings for her. But how was she supposed to find out the feelings of a man who made it his primary ambition in life not to show any?

“I was thinking that perhaps there is a malfunction with the EPS conduits on that deck,” she said, never taking her eyes off him while she spoke.

“Unlikely. The chances of all the conduits on a single deck to malfunction are infinitesimal. Unless,” he said and looked up, “you have recently replaced the conduits on deck twenty-four.”

She shook her head. “No. But perhaps there is a problem with the valves. They could be damaged or unable to handle the new formula.”

“According to your diagnostics, the valves are operating at optimal efficiency,” he said as he looked over the padd again. “Have you performed manual inspections?”

“Not yet,” she said seconds before a sudden idea popped into her head. “Perhaps you could help me with those. I could use an extra hand,” she said with another smile. She quickly regretted it. She was surely coming on too strong now.

“One of your engineers would be better suited for that task.”

She nodded slowly. “Of course”, she said as he returned the padd. “Anyway, thank you for taking a look at this.” Louise took the padd back but avoided eye contact with him now.

“There is another possibility that might explain these symptoms.”

She looked up with a quizzical expression.

“The new intermix formula consists of a highly condensed, inter-modulated deuterium stream, correct?”

She nodded.

“Most EPS conduits constructed before stardate 48321 are layered with a polymer consisting of duranium and oxidized tellurium.”

“Isn’t oxidized tellurium near indestructible?”

“It is. But it does have a weakness.”

“A modulated deuterium stream, reacting with anti-matter and dilithium could create an impure tellurium source all on its own,” she said as the thought popped into her mind.

“Attempting to channel tellurium through a tellurium layered conduit –”

“It would corrode the tellurium layer which could cause all kinds of irregularities in the plasma flow,” she said with unexpected euphoria as if she had just solved the mysteries of life itself.

“Correct.”

“But why only on deck twenty-four?”

“I am not entirely –”

She cut him off again. “Main engineering. It’s closest to the source.”

He nodded.

“I’ll need to replace the EPS conduits all over the ship with non-tellurium layered ones. That way we can continue to use the new formula and take full advantage of the increased power levels.”

“That seems to be the most logical solution.”

Louise smiled again. She didn’t need any more proof. The two of them thought alike and when their minds were combined there was nothing they could not accomplish. If that productivity was true when they were working on technical problems, why couldn’t it work on a more personal level as well?

“How does that drink sound now?” she said with a widening smile.

He did not reply right away. And she could tell that somewhere buried deep inside his iron-clad exterior he felt the same pride at solving this puzzle that she was experiencing. She knew right then and there that she had a shot at getting past the Vulcan’s well-trained defenses. It was a long shot, of course, but there had to be something there she could work with.

“I am afraid my presence is required in the science lab,” he said after what seemed like a second’s worth of deliberation.

"I understand," she said, trying hard not to let her disappointment show as he left his seat.

"I will attempt to accommodate your request if you should require any additional assistance," he added just before he turned and began to head to the exit.

"Commander?"

Xylion stopped to look back at her.

"Thanks."

He gave her a curt nod and then made a quick beeline for the doors.

She watched him leave with mixed feelings. Her meeting had certainly been a success as far as her technical issues had been concerned but she felt she had come nowhere closer to address her more personal feelings or for that matter to discover any kind of feelings Xylion may have had.

"Another one?"

She looked up at the bartender who had managed to step up to her table without making a single sound. She recognized the dark-skinned man immediately. He had come aboard only a few weeks earlier and he was already the talk of the ship. It seemed as if nobody knew much about him, in fact even his race seemed a mystery. He was not very tall but he wasn't short either. His eyes were similar in shape to humans of oriental ancestry but the white, bony ridges that covered most of his otherwise bald head made it obvious that he was not from Earth.

He gestured at the nearly empty glass of her Bajoran juice.

"Sure."

As if he had anticipated her answer, he replaced the empty glass with a full one he had brought on a tablet. "I must say, I haven't seen old Xylion make such a hasty retreat since the time we ran into a pack of le-matya during a trip to the Forge."

She looked at him. "I had no idea you knew Xylion that well."

He nodded. "Oh yes," he said casually. "We've had our share of adventures."

"Really? Bensu, right?"

"That's me."

Her eyes wandered back to the now-closed doors of the Nest. "Well, I bet he never tried this hard to get away from another person."

Bensu took the seat Xylion had vacated. He seemed to ponder her statement for a moment and then looked back at her. "I think you're right."

"I thought so," she said with a sigh and dropped her gaze toward the tabletop.

"Oh no, you misunderstand. That's a good thing," he said with a remarkably wide smile.

"How so?"

"Well, Xylion is usually incredibly focused and collected. I'd say you must have had quite the effect on him for rattling him the way you did."

Her blue eyes sparked. "You mean he might actually like me?"

"I wouldn't rule it out entirely," he said. "Of course, it's hard to tell with Xylion. Many probably haven't taken much notice but he's a changed man since K'tera passed away."

She remembered. About a year earlier Xylion's fiancée K'tera, had been killed on-board Eagle and from what she understood, he had been with her until the very end. She had never really considered how such a loss would have affected a Vulcan. He hadn't really seemed different to her after the incident but now she began to wonder.

"How exactly do you know him, anyway?" she said. It suddenly occurred to her that it was rather strange that Bensu knew so much about the Vulcan science officer. Bensu looked like he was in his early thirties, not much older than herself. Xylion was in his late seventies and the bartender spoke about him with a fondness of a childhood friend. Vulcan physiology was of course different to that of humans which made them appear much younger than they were. Perhaps the same was true for Bensu. But even that explanation only served to raise more questions.

The sound of breaking glass prevented the bartender from replying right away. He looked around and found that one of the many patrons in the Nest had accidentally dropped his filled glass onto the floor, creating a small mess.

He turned back to Louise. "That is a very long story. And sadly, as you can see, I do not have the time for long stories right now," he said and stood up. "Perhaps some other time. For now, you should take comfort in the fact that if nothing else, you succeeded in putting a small chink into Xylion's seemingly impenetrable armor."

She couldn't help but smile. "A small success then."

He nodded. "I'd say so. And in these times, we can use all the success stories we can get, I fear."

Louise noticed Bensu's expression darken and she thought she knew why. The recent war with the Klingons was still fresh on everybody's mind and tensions ran high with several other powerful empires throughout the galaxy. "Let's hope the worst is behind us."

But Bensu didn't seem comforted by the sentiment. He didn't say anything but his facial expression made an obvious statement all by itself. As if he knew something she didn't. As if he was absolutely convinced that in fact, the opposite was true. As if the truly dark times had not even yet begun. She sincerely hoped she was reading him wrong.

Bensu seemed to sense the discouraging messages he was sending and swiftly formed a reassuring smile. "As far as your mission is concerned, know that I'm most definitely rooting for you and a happy ending," he said and then speedily departed to assist the clumsy crewman who had dropped his drink.

She looked after him with hundreds of questions remaining on her mind. But mostly she wondered what exactly a happy ending for her and Xylion would look like.

The Romulan Affair

May 2369

"We have a situation in the Beacon. You better get up here."

The message had been short and as he would soon find out utterly insufficient to prepare him for what he would find at Deep Space Two's most popular establishment.

It was 0432 when he received the call. Lieutenant So'Dan Leva approached the Beacon no fifteen minutes later and despite the early hour a large group of people had already assembled in front of the bar which was being carefully guarded by a handful of his security officers.

The bad feeling the half-Romulan security chief was beginning to sense turned worse when he entered and found both members of the Klingon as well as the Romulan delegation present. They were being kept at opposite ends of the establishment and additional members of the security detail were trying to keep them isolated.

Members of the Federation delegation were also present. Although none of them were Starfleet, he did spot the station's first officer, Commander Tristan Rivers, talking to an agitated senior member of the delegation.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" he said as one of his most trusted officers approached him.

Lieutenant Nora Laas shook her head. "This one is bad," she said and handed him a cup of dark, extra-strong Columbian coffee. She knew that he detested *raktajino*, the Klingon coffee that enjoyed wide popularity across the Federation.

Laas and So'Dan were more than colleagues, they were friends and had been almost since they had first met two years earlier. It was perhaps their complicated backgrounds that had made them become friends so easily. While Laas was a refugee from a war-torn Bajor, Leva had spent most of his early life on a Romulan border colony and later on Earth. Due to his unusual heritage, he had never felt at home in either place.

So'Dan took the brew and sipped on it while following his Bajoran deputy to a small adjacent chamber. The room offered patrons of the Beacon the opportunity to hold meetings in private to discuss sensitive matters. It held little more than a table and two rows of seats.

It was currently unoccupied save for the body of a male Ferengi sprawled out across the table. His chest was lined with half a dozen stab wounds, soaking him in his own blood, which was now dripping onto the table and floor.

He stopped sipping his coffee. He had seen corpses before but rarely one so viciously slain. He rounded the room, careful not to step into the puddle of blood, and looked at the Ferengi's blank face. "He looks familiar."

"His name is Touk. We picked him up once or twice before. He calls himself, well, called himself, an information trader."

He looked up. "Hustler would be more appropriate."

She nodded. "He's well known in this sector for providing information on extremely questionable terms. The bad news here is that we've got a murder case on our hands," she said. It was only the third such case in the last two years on the space station. Homicides were relatively uncommon within the Federation but in places like Deep Space Two, located in the outer fringes of Federation-controlled territory and accessible to all who wished to come here, crimes such as this one were sadly still occurring at irregular intervals.

"The worse news," she continued.

"Is that it happened right in the middle of a tri-lateral diplomatic summit between the Federation, the Klingon, and the Romulan Star Empire," he said finishing her sentence. "I told Rivers that it was a bad idea to allow the delegates to mingle in public areas," he said and joined her as they left the chamber. "What exactly do we know?"

"After finishing their talks for the day, several delegates made their way down here for what I assume was supposed to be some late-night socializing."

He uttered a sarcastic laugh. "Klingons and Romulans? Socializing?"

"Apparently, there was some sort of argument and when we got here, we found Touk dead in that chamber. I guess it is safe to

assume that he possessed information that rubbed somebody the wrong way.”

He eyed both the Klingon and the Romulan delegation while she spoke. The Romulans were not even attempting to make eye contact with him but he noticed the piercing stare from a member of the Klingon camp. “Let me guess, nobody has talked.”

“Oh, they’re talking all right,” she said. “Especially the Klingons. It’s just that they’re not saying anything useful.”

A tall, long-haired Klingon who had kept his eyes on So’Dan ever since he had arrived broke rank and headed straight for the two security officers. “What is this? Who are you?”

He had anticipated the move and quickly braced himself for the confrontation.

“This is Lieutenant Leva, chief of security,” Laas said as she tried to intercept the huge Klingon. “Please stay back, we will talk to your delegation shortly.”

But the man was not to be stopped and easily side-stepped the much shorter woman. “A Romulan to lead this investigation? This is outrageous, I demand that he be removed.”

“Your grievances will be taken under consideration,” So’Dan said and turned away to place his coffee mug on the bar counter.

“Nobody turns their back on K’Togh, Son of Dolok,” he shouted, drew his dagger in a flash, and moved within striking distance.

So’Dan had been waiting for this. He still held his coffee mug in his right hand and now brought it back around in a swift motion. The mug smashed hard against the Klingon’s dagger-wielding hand and broke to pieces, soaking it with the hot dark liquid.

K’Togh dropped his razor-sharp *d’k-tahg* but before he could even attend to his injured hand, So’Dan grabbed his wrist, twisted his arm around his back, and pushed the taller Klingon face-first into the bar counter. “Don’t ever threaten me again.”

“You’ll pay for this,” K’Togh spat.

“And you might want to reconsider your attitude unless you wish to get more familiar with our holding cells.”

“So,” Laas said and stepped behind him.

He added a little bit more pressure to the Klingon’s arm before stepping back and letting him go.

The Klingon wasted no time. His honor had been attacked and he required swift retribution. With or without a weapon he was going to charge the security chief again.

“Mister K’Togh.”

Upon hearing the voice, the Klingon stopped in his tracks, apparently deciding to limit his rage to a murderous stare to make his thoughts undeniably clear.

It was Commander Rivers who had called out for the Klingon. The Starfleet officer swiftly stepped next to the warrior. “Please return to your delegation, I will handle this.”

The Klingon spat at So’Dan’s feet and without another word picked up his weapon and returned to his comrades.

The station’s first officer quickly joined So’Dan by the counter. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, Lieutenant? As if these diplomatic talks weren’t already rocky enough, this incident was the last thing we needed. This whole thing needs to be treated sensitively, and I don’t need somebody like you adding fuel to an already blazing fire.”

“With all due respect, sir,” Laas said. “Mister K’Togh made the first move.”

But the first officer completely ignored the young junior lieutenant. “Mister K’Togh has a valid point. There is a very good reason why we have kept you out of sight over the last few days,” he said as he rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration. “Starfleet isn’t even supposed to be directly involved in these talks, so I can’t have a Romulan Starfleet security officer anywhere near this. I’ve already requested for a special investigator to head this case and they should be here within three days.”

So’Dan just stood there, his eyes focused on K’Togh who had now rejoined his kinsmen.

“For heaven’s sake, just keep a low profile and maybe we’ll get through this.”

“Sir,” an excited ensign was making his way across the bar and toward Laas. He held a tricorder grasped in his hand.

All three officers turned to face the man.

“Calm down, Ensign,” she said. “What do you have?”

The ensign took a few breaths before speaking. "I finished scanning the victim for DNA as you requested. I also did a scan of everybody currently present in the Beacon."

"Speak, man," Rivers said with losing patience. "What did you find?"

"One of the DNA signatures was a match," he said and turned to the Romulan delegation. He pointed at a young Romulan man who was now flanked by security officers. "Mister Ruwen. I found his DNA traces on the victim's body. It's a near-perfect match."

"Excellent," Rivers said quickly. "Perhaps we'll solve this case before the investigator even gets here. Put the man in a brig and have his quarters searched."

"He is a diplomat, sir," said Laas. "Don't you think we'll need a bit more than a preliminary DNA residue match?"

The first officer shook his head. "It's enough to hold him for now. We won't charge him with anything just yet and if we don't find anything else that incriminates him, we can let him go. But I'm not willing to let a potential murderer roam around the station," he said and turned back to So'Dan. "But I don't want you anywhere near this. Don't worry, we'll keep you updated." Rivers turned on his heel to approach the Klingon delegation, no doubt trying to smooth things over with K'Togh.

"What is his problem?" she said as she watched him leave.

"The man doesn't trust me. Never has," So'Dan said. It was nothing new to him. He had met many people like Tristan Rivers in his career. Few were willing to trust a man who had the blood of the infamously deceptive Romulans pumping through his veins.

She looked at him. "What do you want me to do?"

"Follow his orders. It doesn't help anyone if we're both suspended from this case. I'll be in my office," he said and without wasting another thought left the Beacon, leaving Laas behind to deal with Ruwen's arrest.

* * *

"We've found a ceremonial Romulan dagger in Ruwen's quarters. Preliminary scans confirm Ferengi DNA residue on the blade. I have no idea how he managed to get it onto the station."

“The Klingons are allowed to bring some bladed weapons on board for cultural reasons,” he said in response to Laas’s report. The tone in his voice did little to hide his displeasure over that particular policy. So’Dan sat in his chair behind his desk, neither looking directly at his Bajoran deputy nor at his immediate superior who was also present.

Commander Rivers paid no attention to the observation. “I guess that wraps it up then. Ruwen killed Touk. The Romulans are not going to like it but that’s tough. He killed a man on a Federation starbase and he’ll have to stand trial for that.”

Laas, who certainly couldn’t claim to be an expert on homicide investigations, clearly knew enough to know that something was missing. “What about motive?”

“We can safely assume that Touk tried to make a profit from the talks. And he was certainly not above extorting delegates and threatening to disclose sensitive information if they didn’t meet his demands. He must have had something on Ruwen or the Romulan delegation. Something worth killing him for.”

She didn’t look convinced but she couldn’t offer a better explanation either.

“I don’t think we should close the book on this so soon,” So’Dan said.

Rivers pierced him with a glare. “Oh really? Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

He stood. “If there is a problem, Commander, I’d rather have it out in the open.”

Rivers took a step toward So’Dan. “Don’t get me wrong, Lieutenant you’re a good officer—”

“But,” he said, interrupting the other man with a disingenuous smile, “you don’t entirely trust me because my mother happened to be Romulan.”

Rivers looked taken aback by the accusation. “Don’t be ridiculous. This has nothing to do with that. But as you could see for yourself, your presence is causing anxiety among the delegates on all sides.”

He shrugged off the comment, trying to steer the conversation in a different direction. “In any case, I have since spoken to Ruwen—
“

"I gave you explicit instructions not to involve yourself in this investigation," said Rivers, exploding with anger.

So'Dan decided to ignore the outburst. "He seemed to be quite comfortable talking to me and I believe him when he said that he had nothing to do with this."

Rivers laughed. But there was nothing joyful about it. "Do you believe that you have some form of special bond with him because you're both Romulan? That is truly delightful. Tell me, Lieutenant, do you make it a special point to believe every word coming out of a murder suspect's mouth?"

"No," he said, unruffled. "But I was quite interested in hearing his side of the story. He claims to have been framed and that he knows exactly by whom. He knows the identity of the true killer."

"Of course, he does."

"At the very least we should look into his claim," Laas said.

Rivers whipped around to give the Bajoran an incredulous look which caused her to reconsider her next words. He turned back to Leva. "Who does he say did it?"

"He wouldn't tell me," Leva said and took his chair once more. "He wanted certain assurances first."

"How convenient. I'm not willing to play games with this man, Lieutenant. I don't want you anywhere near the prisoner again," he said and looked at Laas. "That goes for you, too. I'll arrange transport to a more secure facility as soon as possible. As far as you are concerned, you're done." Rivers gave So'Dan one last, insistent glare, underlining the seriousness of his statement, before retreating from the office as if it were enemy territory.

Laas turned to So'Dan as soon as the doors had closed behind Rivers. "You didn't tell me that you'd talked to Ruwen."

"I didn't."

She looked perplexed.

"I tried to but he didn't say a single word to me," he said and leaned back in his chair. He didn't add that he hadn't tried very hard either. Striking up a conversation with a Romulan was something that didn't come naturally to him. The idea alone made him slightly uncomfortable.

Laas considered him suspiciously. "What are you playing at here, So?"

The sinister smile that crept onto his face would have made any full-blooded Romulan proud.

* * *

There was of course no night in space.

But Deep Space Two just like most other Starfleet ships and installations observed a twenty-four-hour day and during the later hours, light levels were dimmed to create the illusion of nighttime.

This was also true for the holding cells that were currently occupied by only one prisoner. The Romulan was fast asleep on his simple cot and did not notice that an unannounced visitor had entered the facility. Even if he had been awake, he would have been hard-pressed to make out any features on the dark-clad man. He knew how to stay in the shadows and expertly approached the cell without making a sound.

He stepped up to the impenetrable energy barrier that kept the prisoner locked in his cell and entered a few commands into the control panel beside it. The force field dropped with a gentle whirl.

The stranger carefully stepped into the cell and approached the sleeping Romulan. He reached into a pouch inside his pant leg and removed a small hypo-spray. He made sure the settings were correct before he reached out for his victim's neck.

"Poison?" the Romulan asked.

The stranger froze.

"Not the most honorable way to kill an enemy."

Before the black-clad assassin could react, the man on the cot made his move. Viciously kicking his feet into the side of his attacker's knee, the stranger immediately stumbled backward from the blow.

The prisoner jumped out of his cot and brought up a high-powered flashlight he had been concealing under his body. He activated the palm-sized device, pointing it straight into his would-be assassin's face.

Blinded by the bright beam, the attacker stumbled back and fell against the bulkhead.

So'Dan Leva was not yet satisfied. He gripped the flashlight tightly in his hand and delivered a powerful blow against the other

man's head, causing him to lose all remaining balance and drop to the floor.

So'Dan shined his light back onto his defeated opponent identifying him for the first time. Then he squatted down next to the defeated Klingon warrior and took the hypo-spray. "What is this?" he said with barely concealed fury as he held up the injector.

K'Togh looked at him through dazed eyes, a feral grin his only response.

"Some form of poison? Something untraceable, no doubt," So'Dan said, his eyes sparkling with fiery apathy. "You're nothing but a coward," he spat and moved the hypo closer to K'Togh's neck. "How would you like a taste of your own medicine?"

So'Dan had underestimated the Klingon's resolve. With surprising agility, the warrior launched himself at the security officer, pushing him back and onto his back. K'Togh hands raced for So'Dan's throat and his grip quickly tightened. "I do prefer it this way," the Klingon said with a widening smile. "Even if you are not worth such an honorable death."

So'Dan gasped for air that was not making it to his lungs. His eyes locked with K'Togh's and he recognized the maddening pleasure the man took from taking a life.

Almost too late did he realize that the hypo was still in his hand. K'Togh spotted his intent and quickly disposed of the poisoned injector. But in doing so he had to take his hands off So'Dan's throat.

Recognizing his chance, he brought up his knee and buried it deep in the Klingon's groin. K'Togh went limp and So'Dan pushed himself away to get a chance to catch his breath.

But once again K'Togh recovered quicker than he had anticipated. "I think I'm going to enjoy ripping out your entrails and stuffing them back down your throat, *petaQ*," he growled as he got back onto one knee. He turned to search for his opponent in the dark cell but instead found something else. A phaser rifle. And he was looking straight down its barrel.

"Think again."

Nora Laas held her weapon firmly, keeping it trained at the Klingon, with the emitter nearly touching his face. "So, are you all right?" she said, never taking her eyes off K'Togh.

So'Dan struggled back onto his feet. Moments later the light in the holding cell came back and he saw three more armed guards who had accompanied Laas and who were now quickly moving in to secure the Klingon.

"Just get him out of my sight."

Laas nodded to the guards who grabbed the Klingon and dragged him out of the cell to find him another yet fairly similar accommodation.

"May I ask what exactly prompted you to attempt this insane little operation all on your own?" she said.

But So'Dan simply shrugged off the comment.

She decided to let it go. "K'Togh is the killer? How did you know? And how did he get in here undetected?"

"It's a theory," he said slowly as he began to massage his bruised neck. "But you're not going to like it."

"Try me."

"Relations between the Star Empire and the Klingons have been severely deteriorating since their involvement in the Klingon Civil War last year. I believe certain individuals, even some on our side, do not want those hostilities to be overcome."

"I can see the Klingons holding a grudge but Starfleet officers and Federation officials?" she said. "That's difficult to fathom."

"But not without precedent. Same thing happened at the Khitomer Conference."

"Khitomer," she said with surprise. "I'm not a great student of history but that must have been over a century ago."

He nodded. "History tends to repeat itself."

"I imagine Touk got hold of information about the conspiracy and tried to blackmail members of the Klingon and Federation delegation. That is the only way I can explain Commander Rivers' involvement."

She gave her friend a look of utter disbelief. She quickly looked around to make sure nobody was in earshot before she moved in closer. "You think Rivers is in on this?" she said in a hushed tone.

"How else do you explain how easy K'Togh got access to the brig? I didn't tell anybody else about Ruwen's alleged knowledge of Touk's true killer. And I think it should be quite obvious that the man detests Romulans."

Laas didn't seem all that convinced.

"Didn't you notice how K'Togh reacted to Rivers at the Beacon last night? Almost as if the two of them had an understanding. He isn't even part of the talks, when did they get a chance to create a rapport?"

"That's a lot of conjecture. And even if what you're saying is true, this will be nearly impossible to prove."

So'Dan shrugged "I don't have to prove anything," he said and headed for the exit. "I'm a security officer, I'm not here to expose conspiracies. K'Togh is in custody for attempted murder. It won't be that difficult to connect him to Touk as well. I'll make sure he'll pay for what he's done."

She still seemed to have difficulties getting her head around what he had revealed. "So?"

He turned to her before he had reached the threshold of the cell.

"Where's Ruwen?"

"I released him."

She stepped closer. "You did that before you had any evidence whatsoever that would exonerate him? You've accused Rivers of being prejudiced against Romulans, but aren't you worried that you're letting your own emotions dictate your actions as well?"

So'Dan's only answer was countering her insistent glance.

"For all we know he might have had a part to play in this as well," she said.

His features hardened. "I got my man, Laas. Case closed."

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