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# HOME COMING

VIGNETTE SERIES THREE

Road to  
**Q**UANTUM DIVERGENCE

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# HOME COMING

**ROAD TO QUANTUM DIVERGENCE**  
BASED UPON 'STAR TREK®'

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

“THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES” WRITTEN AND CREATED BY  
**C.J. Dahl**

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# Prologue: Where Do the Children Play, Part 1

May 2376

Michael Owens glanced out of the large windows to watch the stars seemingly streaking by his ship. It had been a long time since they had headed this way, straight back towards Sector zero-zero-one, the Sol System, and *Eagle*'s de-facto home base.

It was long overdue. It was also the first chance for most of the crew to have a proper shore leave after the two long and exhaustive years fighting the Dominion. *Eagle* hadn't served on the frontlines of that conflict consistently, but even those missions that at first glance had appeared to take them away from the ongoing struggle for survival had more often than not turned out to be just as taxing on the ship and her crew. Emotionally as well as physically.

In fact, their previous first officer, a man Michael had considered not just a fellow officer but a friend as well, had lost his life in one of those missions and so had many crewmembers.

The latest reports from Counselor Trenira had shown that the war years had taken a heavy toll on the crew. Of course, Michael didn't need a report to witness this first hand.

He turned away from the windows of the observation lounge to see the tired-faced men and women who made up his senior crew and who sat at the long dark glass and wood-trimmed conference table.

This crew desperately needed a break, a chance to reconnect with everything they had come so very close to give their own lives to protect. They needed a break or they would run the risk of breaking themselves.

And the same could be said for the ship. *Eagle* had performed admirably over the last two and a half years; she had shown her mettle and toughness time and time again. But even the most resilient starship could only take so much, have so many patch repairs after

countless encounters with enemies determined to turn her into scrap metal before she stopped functioning altogether.

The signs were all there. The once pristine hull was pockmarked throughout her saucer and engineering section; several corridors and rooms were still so damaged, they were near uninhabitable and had to be sealed off, and the deck plates groaned and rattled every time the ship jumped to warp as if writhing in anguish at having to exert the effort.

After having commanded her for nearly five years, *Eagle* had become more than a home to Michael and those who crewed her. She had become an extension of their being and it pained him to see her suffering just as much as it troubled him to see any member of his crew in such a state.

He looked towards his red-haired Trill first officer as he took his chair at the head of the table, letting her know to continue with the meeting.

She picked things up after a short nod. "We'll be arriving on Earth as scheduled on stardate 53356.3, just under two days from now. I've been assured we already have a berth at McKinley with our name on it. We'll get a full hull and systems overhaul, as well as long-overdue upgrades to the warp core, sensors, and weapons systems. Maintenance work will last three weeks, which will give everyone plenty of time to catch some R&R."

Michael let his glance wander from the first officer to the rest of the senior staff. There was no doubt that every last one of these people could use a vacation. Even his Vulcan science officer somehow seemed a lot less stoic than he had used to before the war.

"Commander, I understand you're planning to visit Vulcan?" he said.

Xylion offered one of his minuscule nods in response. "That is correct. Bensu and I are due to depart by shuttlecraft in two hours and twenty-five minutes."

DeMara Deen shook her head. "I still don't see how crossing the Vulcan's Forge can be considered a holiday. By any stretch of the imagination."

The science officer regarded the young, blonde-haired Tenarian with a raised eyebrow. "Retracing the steps of one's *kahs'wan* is considered an enlightening experience for most Vulcans. I am looking

forward to the challenge and the opportunities for reflection and meditation this journey will afford."

Doctor Katanga, the veteran physician offered a smirk. "I think that is about as excited as I've ever heard you talk about anything, Xylion. Just make sure you pack plenty of sunscreen."

"Indeed."

Michael smiled and then focused his attention on the octogenarian chief medical officer. "Doctor, how do you plan to spend your shore leave?"

"I will once again undertake the futile attempt to catch up with that ever-growing tribe that is my extended family. Last thing I heard I turned into a great-grandfather. Again."

Michael didn't doubt it, even though he didn't necessarily look it, and certainly didn't sound it, the African doctor had the years on him to have a family large enough to crew a starship of his own. The heavy sigh he uttered was clearly betrayed by the sparkle in his eyes that provided sufficient proof that the man was quite looking forward to welcoming the latest additions to his expansive clan.

"Before I forget," said Owens and glanced towards his left to find DeMara Deen. "I've had word from the Diplomatic Corps. It appears now that things have quieted down a bit, they are working overtime to renew old alliances and making new ones."

Deen nodded. "So I've heard. Apparently, they are holding a major, intergalactic conference on Earth."

"That's right. And there will be a Tenarian delegation there as well. I've been told that the delegation will be led by a man you're quite familiar with," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "Yeega will be on Earth."

Michael Owens had served for four years on Tenaria after he had been part of the crew of the *Fearless* that had been the first Federation starship to make contact with Deen's people and their idyllic planet. As such he knew well that she had practically grown up with Yeega, her second cousin, and a person she had always been very fond of. He was surprised to find, however, that her reaction to the news of reuniting with a close friend, after years of having been away from her homeworld, was not at all what he had expected. She simply offered a little bob of her head as if to simply acknowledge what she had learned.

"In any case," Michael continued, recovering quickly from her subdued reaction. "The Corps has reached out to me for some insight on the delegation and I mentioned that Yeega is your cousin. They'd love to speak to you about him when we arrive."

Deen offered a little smile in response that Michael was certain failed to reach her eyes. He knew that her usual indomitable optimism had been dampened quite a bit over the war years, and especially since their final mission of that conflict that had concluded with a terrible personal loss for her.

If nothing else, he had expected that seeing a close friend, and a fellow kinsman would have lifted her spirits instantly.

Star seemed to sense the awkwardness that had ensued between the captain and Deen and focused the room's attention on Lif Culsten, the silver-haired helmsman as well as on chief engineer Louise Hopkins sitting at his side. "I understand the two of you are getting ready for a long trip."

"Only if you're absolutely sure that you can do without me," said Hopkins. "There's going to be a lot of work that will need to be done on the ship and those spacedock crews might not be familiar with the alterations I've made to—"

Star held up a hand to stop the engineer and then raised a padd sitting on the table in front of her with the other. "The notes you've provided are quite extensive," she said and glanced over the padd. "This is what? Fifty pages of commentary on ship's systems?"

Hopkins gave a little, innocent shrug. "I made a lot of modifications. I guess I never realized how many until I started writing them all down in one place."

Michael smirked knowing full well that Louise Hopkins had been a bit of a prodigy when she had joined *Eagle*, becoming one of the youngest chief engineers in the fleet, certainly on a ship of the line. She was older now of course and had matured quite a bit, partly thanks to the incredible strain that the war years had put on her and her team, but she was still as eager and as brilliant as ever. "I'm sure they'll be able to make do without you, Louise."

She seemed almost relieved at hearing this and then turned to look at Lif Culsten sitting beside her. "This means we should be all good to go for Krellon. I can't wait to see your homeworld."

"Yeah, it'll be great," he said, sounding anything but excited.

"I'm certainly jealous," said Deen. "It's notoriously difficult for non-Krellonians to get permission to enter their territory. I hear there are some amazing cultural and natural monuments on Krellon. You'll be one of the very few outsiders to get a look at those, Lou."

Hopkins nodded eagerly. "I know, it's going to be great," she said and then shot Culsten a sidelong look. "Just wish I wasn't the only one excited about the trip."

"We'll be spending a week inside a small shuttle for a few days on Krellon only to spend another week coming back," he said, "that's not exactly what I'd call a relaxing vacation."

Deen shot them both a mischievous smile. "I think that all depends on the company, no? I can think of plenty of things you could do to pass the time."

This caused Louise Hopkins to blush so much, her entire face was turning bright red and even Culsten looked just a tad embarrassed. Michael was surprised as well, it was not like Deen to be quite that forward with her insinuations.

"Moving on," said Star, once again the one to keep on track. "Mister Leva, I can see here that you and Lieutenant Nora have decided to stay on board," she said after referring to her padd again, a small frown growing on her face.

"Part of the maintenance schedule is an overhaul of the primary phaser distribution grid. I've been talking to Lou about doing this for a couple of years now, so it's somewhat of a pet project for me. I would really like to try and get those changes made while we get the chance. I might even be able to coax a bit more overall firepower out of the grid."

Louise Hopkins nodded. "I think some of your designs could really increase efficiency," she said but then blushed again slightly when she realized that she had invited a few smiles from around the table.

"And I've volunteered to assist," said Nora Laas, the Bajoran chief of security. "It'll give me a chance to brush up on my weapons and tactical knowledge, which I'm the first to admit I've been neglecting for far too long. Your security officer should be able to handle things at tactical in a crunch and to be totally honest, I'm not so sure I'd be that useful at doing that at present."

Michael shook his head. "There is a reason we have a dedicated tactical weapons team, Laas. There has never been any expectation that we'd need you to take over in that capacity. And I certainly don't want you to forgo R&R for this," he said, knowing well that Nora Laas needed some time away from the ship perhaps more than anyone else present.

"I'll find some time for shore leave, I promise," she said in what sounded very much like an effort to deflect from the topic. "How, if I may ask, is our fearless captain planning to spend his time off?"

Star took that one. "The captain has threatened to introduce his first officer to the wonders of scuba diving," she said and aimed him a glimpse his way. "Even though I still suspect that this is all a ruse to bury me at the bottom of one of those disturbingly blue Earth oceans."

"That does sound tempting," Michael said with a little smile. "But believe me, once you get a taste of exploring the Great Barrier Reef and its rich diversity of life, it'll be hard to tear you away from it again."

"I'll take your word for it, sir."

"Any plans on visiting family?" asked Deen.

Michael nodded. "In fact, yes," he said. "I'm hoping to spend some time with my cousin's family. I hear great things about my nephew Cory. It seems he's a rising star at the Academy."

"How about the Admiral?"

Michael frowned at Deen's bringing up his father. He tugged on his uniform jacket. "Yes, I suppose I'll run into him as well," he said and then looked back Star. "Any other business, Commander?"

The Trill seemed momentarily flustered but quickly recovered as she glanced at her padd once more. "Just one last item. The civilians."

"Yes, of course," Michael said when he remembered. After all, he had placed that particular item on the staff meeting's agenda himself. "As you all know, the marines are due to leave *Eagle* once we arrive on Earth." He couldn't keep his glance from wandering towards an empty chair at the far end of the table.

His weren't the only ones. That chair had once been regularly occupied by Major Cesar Wasco for nearly two years and ever since he and his company had come on board in the early days of the

Dominion War. He and his men had performed admirably during that period, in fact, Michael doubted very much that most of them would still be here now if it hadn't been for their dedication and willingness to place themselves in harm's way. Wasco himself had lost his life in that struggle, tragically not at the hands of an enemy but those of an ally.

"I have learned that a great number of starship captains in the fleet have opted to keep their war-time marine contingents as additional security forces and Command has, for the most part, allowed for this to happen. And while the advantages of having a well-trained military force onboard can hardly be overstated, the downside is the fact that we would not have enough room to accommodate *Eagle*'s civilian population to return. I thought I open the matter up to discussion before I make my final decision."

Unsurprisingly the security chief and former marine herself jumped in straight away. "I vote to keep the marines, sir. My team and I have worked with them very closely over the last two years. We've formed a seamless unit and it has greatly improved our effectiveness when dealing with hostile elements."

"Of which we are likely to see a lot fewer now that the war is over," said Katanga.

The Bajoran shook her head. "Don't be so sure of that, Doctor. The galaxy has become a very different place. A much more dangerous place. Piracy and lawlessness even within Federation borders have greatly increased. Minor powers that were previously hardly a threat to Federation security have become emboldened by the losses we have taken during the war."

Star nodded. "Recent intelligence reports do show increased threat levels from several foreign powers that border our space."

"My point is, we are going to need all the help that we can get to be prepared for these new threats. I'm not saying that my security team isn't up to the task. But having the marines around could mean the difference between a single casualty in an enemy encounter or having to send dozens of condolence letters."

That last point was clearly directed at Owens himself and Michael didn't fault her for it. She had a point and the ensuing silence showed that most of the others could see it too. Even Katanga didn't have an immediate comeback to this, no doubt the images of his

sickbay overflowing with wartime casualties still too fresh in his memory.

“I disagree.”

All eyes turned towards DeMara Deen. Little surprise there. Even though she may not have been her usually buoyant self as of late, she was still the biggest humanist on the ship. The little fact that she wasn’t human didn’t stop her.

“I mean, yes, I understand the security aspect of it but I believe that we would be giving up too much by not allowing the civilians to come back. I’ve already had dozens of requests to lift the moratorium on non-Starfleet personnel on board from wives and husbands to the many parents we have on the ship. Speaking strictly in terms of morale, having families reunited will greatly increase crew efficiency, which we all know has still not returned to its pre-war levels.”

“I can attest that Counselor Trenira agrees with that. She told me pretty much the same thing just the other day,” said Doctor Katanga. “Ship morale could use all the help it can get.”

Deen nodded. “We’ve been talking about it for a while. And don’t make the mistake to believe that a nice long shore leave will cure all our ills. If we keep people away from their immediate families for too long, it will have a negative effect. There’s a reason why Starfleet decided to allow families on starships in the first place. And there are other advantages as well. Many of the civilians fulfill important duties on this ship that have been sorely missed.”

Xylion seemed to agree with that point. “Nine of my researchers were civilians and their contributions were significant and valuable to ongoing scientific projects.”

“And it’s not just them. I’m also talking about the people looking after the arboretum, tending bar in the Nest, civilian ambassadors, and the various other experts in fields that we otherwise would not have access to. They are all part of what makes this ship tick. And that diversity is what Starfleet is all about. Isn’t it exactly that image of an all-inclusive Federation we want to present to our allies and enemies alike? Not to mention any new civilization we might hopefully encounter.”

Her impassioned speech left an impression and for a moment silence returned.

"Yes, until said civilization decides to turn their weapons on us and starts shooting," Leva said eventually and getting a grunt of approval from Nora sitting next to him.

"One could argue that it's an occupational hazard in our line of work," said Lif Culsten. "And for anyone who decides to serve on a starship. Starfleet and civilian alike."

"Yes," Deen said and glanced right at the captain. "And all those civilians coming on board are fully aware of those dangers. And they believe, just like I do, that the rewards far outweigh the risks."

Michael considered that argument. It was, of course, the very same one that had occupied Federation minds on all levels ever since Starfleet had decided to allow for civilians to serve on starships. Nora was not wrong, of course, back in those days the galaxy had been a very different place. Or had it?

The security chief had been busy working on a padd for the last minute and handed it to Leva to pass it on to the captain. The half-Romulan nodded in agreement when he spotted the content but when Deen got a hold of it, she frowned before passing it on to Owens.

"Before you make your decision, sir," said Nora just as Michael was getting his hands on it. "I do have an alternative proposal. I'll have to call in some favors to make it work but I think in principle it's a setup that would work well for *Eagle* and fulfill all our needs."

Michael looked at the padd and then nodded at her, acknowledging the fact that she had clearly given this some thought, expecting this very argument. "Very well. I'll make a decision on this before we are due to leave Earth." He glanced at his right to find Star. "I think that's all folks."

The first officer nodded and stood. "Dismissed then. And, oh yeah, make sure you all enjoy yourselves over the next few weeks. If I find out that you're not, we're going to have words."

# The Burden of Truth

May 2376

He had lobbied pretty hard for Casperia Prime as their first-ever shore leave as a couple and Louise Hopkins had to admit that he had made a pretty convincing sales pitch.

And while she wasn't exactly what one would call the outdoorsy-type, in fact, more often than not she preferred the familiar surroundings of her engine room to join an away team to an alien world, the idea of taking long, barefoot walks on the seemingly endless beaches of the well-known vacation planet had appealed even to her.

And yet in the end she had quite uncharacteristically insisted on their destination.

After all, she had never known anyone who didn't hail from Krellon to make the trip there. Even after attempts at researching the reclusive world using *Eagle's* extensive computer library, with a direct uplink to Memory Alpha, the planet that held the Federations' entire knowledge, she had come up with scarcely anything about Krellon and the people who lived there.

Had it not been for Lif Culsten becoming *Eagle's* helmsman, she wouldn't even have known that his planet existed.

Lif was one of two Krellonian's she had ever encountered in her life and the second one she'd had an intimate relationship with. The first had been an engineer working under her. The fact that she had been his direct superior had only been one of the many things that had been wrong with that turbulent affair that had lasted just a few weeks and had ended in tragedy the previous year when he had been killed under initially quite mysterious circumstances.

It had been of little surprise then, that her best friend, Nora Laas, had tried to caution her of pursuing another relationship with a Krellonian.

Louise glanced to her left where Lif was sitting at the shuttle's helm controls. His fine hair was long and silver and woven into an intricate braid while the sides of his head were almost entirely bald, showing off his coppery skin and most remarkably of all, the absence of any ears, a characteristic of his people who absorbed sound waves

directly through the outer epidermis of their skin instead. She had not yet learned if that made them better or worse listeners.

Lif was different from the man she had been with before. First of all, she had known Lif for nearly five years, they had both come on *Eagle* together. He had been a friend long before they had become romantically involved only a few months earlier. And thanks to his recent promotion to full lieutenant, they were of equal rank, even if she privately liked to joke with him that she technically had seniority and therefore could give him orders, to which he liked to counter that as a bridge officer, he was higher in the chain of command and therefore could countmand those.

"We can still make Casperia if we alter course now," he said, apparently studying star charts. "We won't even lose any time if we increase speed to warp six."

As an engineer, she didn't even have to think about what he had just proposed. "On a Type-7?" she said incredulously, referring to their shuttle. "We'll redline the engines and end up stranded in the middle of nowhere. We'll be lucky if we get rescued inside a week."

"Not if we throttle back down to factor four every three hours and let the engines cool down. Trust me, I have enough time logged in these shuttles to know what they can take."

She shook her head. "And I've taken these engines apart and rebuilt them so many times, I know their limit and the risk of pushing them too far repeatedly."

Culsten shrugged. "Just saying, that window of making a course change is closing quickly."

He had offered a whole litany of arguments why Casperia would be a better destination than visiting his homeworld, from citing the better climate to pointing out the long time they would need to get there and remain inside the small shuttle, to the difficulty for off-worlders to obtain an entry visa. It had all started to sound like excuses to her

"You're embarrassed by me."

His head whipped around to face her. "What?"

"Why else have you been so reluctant to go back to Krellon?" She pointed an accusatory finger at him. "Your parents won't approve of you being with a human. You don't want them to find out about me."

He quickly shook his head. "That's not true. My parents find humans fascinating. My mother has studied humans even before I was born. Has written papers on them."

"Really?" She considered that for a moment. "Are you running from the law? You committed some sort of heinous crime on your world, didn't you? And your only way out was to escape to the Federation. The moment you step back onto your world you'll be arrested."

Lif uttered a little laugh at her imagination. "Yeah, that's it. I'm public enemy number one on Krellon." A little sigh escaped his lips as he swiveled his chair back towards the console. "The truth is, I just haven't been home for a long time and it's become a very different place to what it once was."

"Same can be said for a lot of places. Especially after the war."

"It might be difficult for you."

"Do they have gravity? An oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere? Water?"

He nodded. "Yes, yes, and yes."

"Then I don't see the problem. Oh my God," she stared right into his eyes when a terrible thought crossed her mind. "They don't wear clothes on your world. Everyone is walking around naked like some sort of never-ending Betazoid wedding."

At that Lif laughed out loud. "I wish."

She punched him in the shoulder.

"Ow."

"Then everything is going to be fine."

"It's not that easy. My people and I don't mean my family per se, they're not very good with foreigners. It took me nearly two weeks to get that entry visa for you and even then, I had to get my family to pull quite a few strings. I'm still not sure they'll even let you in."

Louise stood from her chair. "We've got six more days until we get there, plenty of time to make the necessary calls and preparations. Worst case scenario, they turn me away, and if that happens Casperia isn't going anywhere. And if I do get in, I get to say that I boldly went where hardly any non-Krellonian have ever gone before. That'll make me feel like a real explorer."

"I thought you joined Starfleet for the technology."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Time to widen my horizon. I'm going to go get some rest. Relax, I'm sure it's going to be fine," she said and then headed towards the back of the shuttle to catch some shut-eye. After all, it was going to be a long trip.

\* \* \*

There was only so much one could do in a shuttle half the size of a crew cabin for seven days. But then, of course, one didn't get to a remote part of space to which few had ever traveled before without spending a lot of time cooped up in a starship.

It didn't help that space travel was inherently an incredibly boring affair. Most people who had never ventured beyond their planet's atmosphere didn't fully appreciate how fantastically vast the galaxy really was. And the majority of the time there was just nothing to see out there but a lot of empty space and distant stars. There was no pulling over for a little bit to catch some fresh air or stretch one's legs unless you were willing to go hours or even days out of your way. And traffic was practically non-existent save for the very rare blip on sensors indicating another starship that was traveling so far away and at such a high speed, it would have been impossible to spot it with the naked eye.

Had she been an astrophysicist she may have shown greater appreciation for the inherently dense stellar formations of the Amargosa Diaspora they were traversing to reach their destination. The globular cluster was tightly packed with a large number of bright stars that could make navigation tricky and kept Culsten on his toes.

And for a short while, the colorful spacescape held her fascination, but even that eventually grew old after looking at much of the same thing day after day.

It was on journeys like these that Louise could understand why Starfleet filled their ships with so many distractions such as holodecks, lounges, and arboretums. Long-distance space travel by shuttle made cabin fever look like a mild itch in comparison.

"We're approaching Krellonian space. About twelve more hours until we get to Krellon Prime."

Louise, lying on one of the makeshift beds in the back—which she had since determined needed an urgent upgrade to improve comfort—simply yawned at the news. "Wake me when we get there."

"You might want to get up for this."

Intrigued by his tone, she left the bunk and joined him at the controls. "Why, what's happening?"

"I have a border security vessel on sensors, approaching us at high warp."

"Border Security? That was fast," she said as she took her seat next to his.

He turned his chair to face her. "They're probably going to want to board and ask us some question. Just remain calm and answer any questions to the point and truthfully."

She frowned. "You make this sound like an interrogation."

His silence seemed answer enough.

Within five minutes they were being hailed. *"Attention, unidentified vessel. You have violated Krellonian sovereign territory. Hold your position and power down your engines immediately."*

"Friendly bunch, those guys."

But Lif was already following the instructions, dropping out of warp and then shutting down the warp engines. "Keep in mind that Krellon and the Federation aren't exactly close allies. I'm sure our Border Service would respond similarly if a Krellonian vessel were to enter Federation space."

"I'd like to think our people would at least say please. Besides, didn't you tell them we were coming?"

"First thing to know about my people, Lou. Our bureaucracy moves at snail's pace."

She offered a large grin to that. "Show me a place where it doesn't."

With the shuttle sitting dead in space, it took the Border Security vessel another hour to finally reach them. Louise thought this to be extremely inefficient. If they had been allowed to travel on at warp, they could have saved everybody a whole lot of time. Lif reminded her that Krellonians took territorial integrity very seriously.

Louise did marvel however at their ship design. It was the first Krellonian vessel she had ever seen and it was quite a sight. It was shaped in the form of two wedges stuck together in an upside-down v-shape with purple-colored nacelles attached at each end and pointing upwards like wings. The ship was about three or four times the size of their shuttlecraft. The engineer in her had the overwhelming urge to run a few scans to learn more about the design. What kind of FTL engine did it have? What was the composition of its outer hull? How fast could it go? She decided against doing anything that could get her accused of being too nosey or worse, a spy.

As Lif had already expected, they were boarded within minutes of the ship coming into range and he and Louise stood up to expect their visitors.

There were four of them, all armed with heavy rifles and wearing body armor made out of chrome-like metal that caught and reflected the

light. All four of them had short silver hair running in a Mohawk-like strip across their head, including the female officer. They had intricate tattoos on the side of their otherwise bald and earless heads that were all similar but had minute variations. Louise guessed that the markings indicated their rank, position, or some other military classification.

All four had their rifles trained on them.

Louise raised her hands instinctively. She had been prepared to offer a friendly greeting of sorts but looking down the barrels of those weapons, it had gotten stuck in her throat.

Lif spoke for her. "Liftu-Tensu-Leetu," he said, indicating to himself. One of the few things Louise had learned about Krellonians was that they had long names and didn't use their family names in most situations. Lif like the few other Krellonians who lived in the Federation tended to take on names that were easier to use in daily life. "And this is Louise Hopkins. We are on our way to visiting Krellon Prime. Entry authorization Hertu-Indo-Five-Seven-Seven."

The lead officer lowered his rifle—his colleagues did not follow his example—and checked a padd built into the armor on his forearm. After a few moments, he nodded and Louise let out a small breath she had not realized she had been holding in. She did notice, however, that the other officers still refused to lower their weapons.

The leader stepped closer and right up to Lif, he looked him over for a moment and then raised his arm so that his wrist sensor could get a good look at his face. He then did the same for Louise.

"Uh, hi there, my name is—"

"You are human?" He almost barked the words.

She nodded gingerly. "Yes."

"This vessel belongs to the Federation Starfleet?"

Lif jumped in. "Yes, sir, we are—"

"I am not talking to you," he snapped and then looked back at Louise.

She nodded again, they had long since changed out of their uniforms and were wearing civilian attire now. "It belongs to the Starfleet ship we both serve on. The *Eagle*. I'm her chief engineer, Lif here—I mean Liftu-Tensu-uh-Leetu is the helmsman."

He entered some more information into his wrist computer. "Full name and military rank."

"Louise Chirac-Hopkins. Lieutenant."

"Place of birth?"

"Earth."

"Be more precise."

"Okay, sure. Ottawa, Ontario. I don't know how familiar you are with my planet," she said and allowed herself a small smile. "It's on the North American—"

"What is the purpose of your visit?"

She shot Lif beside her a glance and he nodded. "We're just visiting his family. Shore leave, I suppose."

"Duration?"

"About a week, maybe longer, depends on how—"

The officer turned around abruptly to return to the rest of his team. He consulted with one of his colleagues.

Louise glanced back at Lif. "What's going on?" she whispered.

"Just ... wait."

They didn't have to for long. The lead officer turned back around, addressing Lif this time. "You are authorized to enter Krellonian space. Liftu-Tensu-Leetu, you will be solely responsible for your foreign guest while you are within Star Alliance territory. During this time, you are not permitted to travel to any other world within the Star Alliance other than Prime. Your authorization ends within two standard weeks after which time your guest must vacate the Star Alliance or face criminal charges. A flight plan to approach Prime is being transferred to your computer as we speak. You will not deviate from that flight plan unless directed. Failure to comply with any of those instructions will result in criminal charges against you and your companion. Do you understand and agree to these stipulations?"

Lif nodded promptly. "Yes, I do."

"Your entry has been logged and approved," the officer said and then pressed a control on his wrist computer and the four officers disappeared in a transporter beam.

Louise was still so stunned by the entire affair, she didn't dare move for another few seconds after they had left. Then she very slowly turned to look at Lif, still at her side. "You were not kidding about your people not liking visitors, were you?"

"Actually, that went better than I expected."

\* \* \*

As far as she was concerned, they couldn't arrive quickly enough. As a chief engineer who preferred spending most of her time in her cavernous engineering room, she was used to long stints without ever seeing a real sky or feeling authentic sunshine on her skin, but at least on a starship, she was free to stretch without being in danger of hitting a bulkhead.

After their encounter at the border, the rest of their trip through Krellonian space was uneventful. Krellonia or Krellon Prime was a large blue marble of a planet, slightly larger than Earth and with similar cloud coverage. It had two moons and orbited the yellow dwarf, main-sequence star of a binary system. Among countless satellites and a dozen or so orbital facilities, Krellon apparently also attracted a great amount of space traffic, none of which appeared to be from the Federation. Louise recalled Lif mentioning that the planet functioned as the capital seat of the Krellonian Star Alliance that was made up of a small number of worlds.

After asking and receiving clearance to approach and land, he directed the shuttle to a spaceport at a medium-sized city on the Northern continent.

Louise was glued to the viewport all the way down, taking in as much as possible of a world most of her peers had never even laid eyes on before.

Stepping out of the shuttle they had been confined to for the last week was like an act of liberation and she had never been happier breathing fresh air and feeling the wind against her face.

"You need to get out more."

She looked at his smirking face after having watched her close her eyes and enjoying the moment. "I'll add that to the growing list of the things I should be doing more of."

She felt herself getting a little giddy when he left her alone on the busy street outside the spaceport to secure transportation. Like a stranger in a strange land, she didn't know much of anything about this place, would have been completely lost without Lif as his guide.

All around her she observed Krellonians going about their business, many of whom wore similar hairstyles as she had seen on the security officers earlier. Their dress was much more varied, however, from long frocks to light shirts and even short skirts on younger women.

There were also a great many uniforms among the crowd, shimmering in a similar chrome-like look she had seen on the border

patrol personnel. This didn't seem too odd considering that she was standing outside a busy spaceport.

It was perhaps more security than she was used to on Earth and other Federation worlds. In fairness, however, she hadn't really stepped foot on Earth since before the war and it was very likely that their most recent conflict with the Dominion had changed policies on a planet that over the last few centuries had become famous for its welcoming ways and its insouciant approach to security.

As far as she knew, the Krellonian Star Alliance had managed to remain neutral in that war. She certainly didn't recall any Krellonians other than the handful serving in Starfleet fighting the Dominion.

"Name?"

She turned around startled. A couple of security officers had approached her, considering her curiously, apparently never having encountered a human before.

"Excuse me?"

"Your name."

"Hopkins, Louise," she said, a bit startled by the man's gruff tone.

He promptly checked his wrist computer. After a moment he nodded to his colleague and they walked on without another word.

She looked after them with some irritation at the rude behavior. A loud beep caused her to whip back around and toward a busy intersection a hundred meters away and just in time to see a heavy transport vehicle come to a grinding halt while a much smaller, personnel vehicle cut it off. The offending car quickly sped away but the suddenly stopped transport caused another, bullet-shaped vehicle to crash into its driver cabin with some speed. The resulting crash left the smaller vessel badly mangled and even the chassis of the transport had given way under the stress of the impact.

Without a second thought, Louise rushed toward the scene to see if she could assist. But by the time she got close, several bystanders had already approached, first and foremost a whole gaggle of security officers.

With some relief, she found that neither driver had been seriously injured thanks to anti-collision measures within the respective vehicles. The driver of the bullet-shaped car, a young woman, was clearly dazed, however, and needed the help of a few security officers to stand. The driver of the transport did not appear to be a local as far as Louise could tell. He had noticeable reptilian features that reminded her a little bit of a Jem'Hadar, with green leathery skin and small white horns protruding

out of his skull. He had a gash on his forehead that trickled with greenish blood.

Many of the bystanders were shouting angrily at the man as if the accident had been his fault.

Then moments later the security officers approached him. At first, she thought they were going to tend to his injuries but to her surprise, they placed him in restraints and put him into a police vehicle that had since arrived at the scene.

Louise tended to be mostly bashful in situations that didn't call for her engineering expertise but in this case, she felt as if she should speak up. She turned to the nearest peace officer. "Uh, excuse me, sir, but I've seen the whole thing. It wasn't the truck driver's fault. There was another—"

"Name?" he said after he looked her up and down.

"What?"

"What is your name?" he repeated.

"I already gave one of your colleagues my name. Listen, I saw what happened—"

"I need your name," he said again, his voice more forceful.

She sighed. "Louise Hopkins."

He checked his wrist computer. "Very well. Carry on, we have the situation under control."

Before she could object, he had already turned and walked away.

She heard another beep behind her and found that it originated from another bullet-shaped vehicle. Lif stuck out his head from the driver's window. "Come on, Lou, let's go. Don't be a gawker."

\* \* \*

"Did you see that accident?" she asked later after she had boarded the vehicle and they were speeding away from the spaceport.

"Not really. Don't you just hate those people who have nothing better to do but stare and ogle at the misfortunate of others?"

She nodded, but mostly absentmindedly. "They got the wrong guy."

"Huh?"

Louise turned to him. "They arrested the driver of the wrong vehicle. It wasn't his fault. I feel we should go back and clear things up."

He didn't say anything, instead, he kept his eyes on the road as he steered their car through the city.

"Lif?"

"I'm sure they have things under control. Besides, from the look of things, there were countless eyewitnesses. I'm sure they don't need another one."

"But what if they do? I don't want the wrong person being blamed for the accident."

"Did it ever occur to you that the laws here might not be the same as the ones you're used to?"

"What does that mean?"

He uttered a heavy sigh. "Look, Lou, you're new here, okay? I already warned you that things might be a little different here from what you know. I don't think the best thing to do is to go around and try to create trouble on your first day."

She wasn't quite sure what to say to that. He had a point, of course, she knew next to nothing about this society and it wasn't right to make judgments after less than an hour on this world. And yet, her inherent sense of right and wrong had been offended by what she had seen, and it wasn't easy to ignore that.

Lif had no interest in pursuing this matter further and she decided to follow his advice for now. As she glanced out of the window to look at this strange new place, she couldn't help but start noticing something else. She hadn't paid attention to it at first but now it seemed quite obvious. Besides the Krellonians there were also plenty of off-worlders in the streets, none of whom she recognized. She figured that they hailed from the nearby planets that made up this alliance. And there was something else. It was very subtle but yet it was there. The demeanor of those off-worlders was different. They mostly seemed to stick to themselves and she could hardly see any of them mingling with the natives of this world. Even their clothes seemed different, somehow, and not just stylistically. It seemed of inferior quality to the oftentimes more elaborate clothes the Krellonians were wearing.

Once they had left the city behind, there were fewer and fewer people to see and soon the landscape became almost desolate with barely a person in sight. Louise couldn't claim to be a people person exactly, but after spending a week in the sole company of just one other living being, she almost craved the company of others.

Thankfully, she didn't have to wait very long to be among people once more. After an hour's drive, they entered a small, provincial town and Lif steered the vehicle towards his family home.

He had explained that even though he had been born on a colony world, his family lived in his grandparents' estate here at the center of the Star Alliance. And while Lif had not spoken about this in any detail, it became quickly obvious to Louise that his family must have been pretty wealthy. How else to explain the massive, almost palace-like home they were approaching? His house was so large, it was practically the only one situated on the street and had its own private road flanked by tall trees that reminded her of pines. Louise had to remind herself that this wasn't the Federation. Wealth and money mattered here, similar to how it had once ruled Earth just a few centuries ago.

They were received by a servant with somewhat avian features. Louise didn't recognize the race but thought she had seen similar-looking aliens back in the city.

Lif knew this man by name and they exchanged greetings. He didn't bother to introduce her to him.

The clipped conversation was a stark contrast to their next encounter. An adolescent boy—no older than fifteen or sixteen, she guessed—came bouncing down the wide staircase with barely restraint excitement. He had a canny resemblance to Lif and it didn't take much to guess that he must have been his younger brother.

They hugged tightly and Lif introduced him as Yintu. The younger Culsten was a bundle of energy and clearly very excited to see his brother again in the flesh, reminding Louise that it had been at least four years since he had last visited his home. Yintu adored his older brother but he was even more fascinated by his exotic guest. He couldn't stop asking questions about the Federation, humans, and Starfleet and explained in rushed delight that he couldn't wait to someday visit Earth as he practically dragged the two of them toward his room on the second floor.

They were treated to what looked like a monument to human culture, with posters of various iconic Earth locations decorating the wall, from the Egyptian Pyramids to the Great Wall of China, and the Golden Gate Bridge. Yintu asked Louise to pinpoint on an old-fashioned, freestanding globe at the center of the large room which part of that world she hailed from and she quickly found North America and pointed at Ottawa.

Not a moment later Yintu had a song playing over the speakers in his room. Louise thought she had heard it before but it was very old and not quite in her wheelhouse. Yintu hummed along to it, as a woman with a very distinct and powerful voice crooned nostalgically about a person

called McGee traveling to New Orleans. He hid well his disappointment when he realized that she didn't seem to know the song nearly as well as he did.

After a nearly half an hour-long Q&A session, Lif managed with some effort to extricate himself and Louise from his eager brother to give her the nickel-tour of his home that was large enough that it consumed nearly an hour. During the tour, she learned that his grandparents were influential politicians and that Lif came from a long line of wealthy Krellonians. His grandparents were part of the old elite and rather conservative in their outlook, Lif had warned her. They had greatly opposed his decision to leave the Star Alliance and join Starfleet. After all the Krellonian culture laid heavy emphasis on the wisdom of the oldest members of its society, so when Lif had decided to defy their wishes, it had been tantamount to open rebellion.

Louise was starting to understand why he had been so resistant to coming back to his home after having seemingly ignored the best advice of his own family when he had left Krellon behind.

She was introduced to his parents a short time later. After everything she had heard, Louise had braced herself for that meeting, expecting that their xenophobic worldview would cloud their opinion of her.

She couldn't have been more mistaken.

Lif's parents were nothing but warm and friendly toward her, as well as delighted to see their son having returned home. Nimtu, his father, was a tall, handsome man—she could immediately see where Lif had gotten his good looks from—a little stiff and proper perhaps but very polite and also curious about her and her job in Starfleet. Little wonder as he served as a senior officer in the Alliance Navy.

Lif's mother Sanu was even more inquisitive. She worked at a large, local museum of culture and almost naturally thought of Louise Hopkins, the exotic alien, as a specimen to be studied. But never disrespectfully or in an aloof manner. Lif had also inherited her humor and empathy.

Louise was beginning to feel much better about this visit as the family was gathering for the evening meal in the huge dining hall that was nearly the size of The Nest, *Eagle*'s main crew lounge. With its massive wood table and high ceiling and elaborate crystal chandelier, it was a room fit to host a state banquet.

Just before the first meal was to be served, the last two guests arrived, Lif's uncle Yorlo and his wife Garla and even though the two

were husband and wife, they arrived separately, mere minutes from each other, and hardly even acknowledged the other.

Lif had explained that they had been separated for nearly ten years now, only remaining betrothed due to cultural and financial reasons. Both, after all, held respected government positions, and apparently, in Krellonian society, a divorce could be a hindrance to one's career.

The estranged couple, Lif had told her beforehand, usually avoided each other these days, but his visit home had demanded certain family customs to be observed.

They also looked nothing alike, Louise realized. While Yorlo was short, had a squat stature, with long silver hair, Garla was much more statuesque, almost as tall as Lif, and looked much younger than her fifty years. She looked fit and athletic, a woman who clearly took good care of her physique.

Lif had warned her about Garla. Working for a Krellonian intelligence agency she was not only a powerful operator, but she was also one of the most headstrong members of the family with very strong views on several subjects.

Yorlo introduced himself to Louise and offered her a warm smile while Garla gave little more than a nod and exchanged only curt pleasantries with Lif and the rest of the family before taking a seat at the farthest point of the table.

Only once everyone was in their chairs did Lif's grandparents enter the dining hall and they did so in grand fashion. The large, wooden double doors were opened ceremoniously by four uniformed and silver-gloved members of the waiting staff who loudly stamped their boots once after taking their position, flanking the doors like honor guards.

The casual conversation around the table died off instantly and everyone turned to look toward the couple entering the room. Louise followed suit. They were both regal in appearance and demeanor as they strutted into the room and for a moment Louise felt terribly underdressed.

Greetings were mostly curt and efficiently taken care of. It fell to Lif's mother to introduce Louise. They nodded to her politely and she nodded back. She wanted to tell them how nice it was to meet Lif's family and visit Krellon, but she never got the chance as both their attentions quickly moved on to Lif instead.

Once they had exchanged pleasantries with everyone at the table, more with some than others, they indicated for the wait staff, apparently giving the signal that they were ready to eat.

Without further delay, several food carts were wheeled into the hall and the waiters began to serve each dinner guest in order of seniority, starting with Lif's grandparents and leaving her for last.

The whole thing made her feel as if she had stepped back in time, like a dinner party at an old European royal court.

"Do you always dine in this manner here?" she asked Lif sitting next to her, her voice low enough to not draw attention to herself.

He gave her a bored look that was meant to communicate his annoyance at all the pomp and circumstance. Perhaps even his embarrassment. "Special occasions only."

She wondered if the special occasion today was the fact that he had returned home or that he had brought a woman. And an alien at that. Considering how little interest she had generated with the heads of his family; it was clearly not about her.

The food however looked and tasted exquisite, and she was fairly certain that it had not been replicated, the succulent white and dark meats simply smelled too fresh and seemed too juicy to be products of a replicator. This in itself was a rare treat for somebody who spent the majority of her time on a starship.

Yintu did not appear as impressed by the cuisine on offer. "You probably get to taste all manner of different foods all the time as you travel to all kinds of different worlds as a Starfleet officer," he said, looking at both Lif and Louise.

"Not as often as you might think," said Louise, thankful to be able to engage his hosts in conversation. "It's mostly replicated food for us. But this is truly fantastic," she added and looked towards Lif's parents and grandparents to make sure the compliment was received.

The family elders took little notice while Nimtu and Sanu offered warm smiles in response.

"But I bet your replicators produce foods from hundreds of worlds," said Yinto, clearly refusing to have his enthusiasm dampened. "One of the first things I'm going to do when I join Starfleet is sampling every last selection."

Louise shot him a surprised look, even though it had become obvious after meeting Lif's younger brother that he was obsessed with the Federation and human culture, he had not hinted at his inclination to follow his brother's footsteps. On second thought, Louise realized that

she shouldn't have been surprised at all and uttered a bemused, little laugh. "That'll probably take you a while. And you might want to keep an eye on your waistline as well, Starfleet has some strict physical fitness requirements, you know."

Garla took an interest in the conversation for the first time, but instead of addressing Louise or her young nephew, she looked toward his mother. "What is this talk about Starfleet?"

Sanu shook her head. "First time I've heard this."

Louise thought that seemed unlikely considering his predilection for Earth music and culture he had so eagerly displayed earlier.

"It's a phase," said Nimtu, as if he had to defend his son's interests to Garla.

"Not true," Yinto shot back. "I want to join Starfleet and pilot starships. Lif and I already talked about it and he fully supports my decision."

And just like that, all eyes at the table focused on Lif. To Louise he looked as if he wanted to melt into his chair, so uncomfortable was he with this sudden topic of conversation. Lif considered his brother. "I just answered your questions about the Academy, Yin. I didn't know you wanted to join Starfleet. It's not that easy if you're not from a Federation world, I told you that. You would need a sponsor."

Yinto nodded quickly. "Right, you."

"No, I don't fulfill the requirements. It would have to be a high-ranking Starfleet officer or Federation official."

"That's fine. I'm sure you know many of those."

A heavy sigh escaped Lif's lips.

"Young man, this conversation is moot, regardless," said Garla sternly. "Your parents and I have already discussed your future. You will be considered as a member of the Eye."

"What's the Eye?" Louise whispered to Lif.

"The Eye of Krellon. It's the security and intelligence organization Garla is a member of," he said, keeping her voice just as low.

"That's nice that you all seem to have discussed this. Doesn't change the fact that I'll be leaving this backwater solar system as soon as I'm seventeen and join Starfleet."

"Out of the question," Garla said sharply. "One member of the family having turned their back on his people is more than enough. You have great things in your future, young man, and I'll be damned if I let you throw that all away because of one of your deluded fancies."

"It's no fancy—"

It was Yorlo, his uncle, who cut him off. "I for one think it is a splendid idea, Yin. It is high time that we as a people spread our wings a bit and make an impact beyond our borders." He half-emptied his large wine glass after butting into the conversation.

Garla shot her estranged husband a poisonous glare and Louise couldn't quite tell if his comments had been his honest opinion or if he simply relished the opportunity to openly disagree with his wife. Regardless, his point of view seemed to be in a minority at the table.

"This is not a conversation we should be having here and now, in front of a guest, no less," said Lif's mother and gave Louise a slightly embarrassed smile at the family disagreement that was being aired publicly.

"Oh, please, I fully understand," she said. "Neither of my parents were thrilled about my decision to join Starfleet. Trust me we had quite a similar conversation when I was about your age," she added, glancing back at the youngest person at the table. "And sometimes your first instinct isn't necessarily the right one, either. This is one of those decisions you'll need to consider very carefully. And I'm sure your family is more than happy to support you with this."

Nimtu nodded, "Well said."

Her pride in defusing the increasingly tense situation didn't last, however.

"There is nothing to be considered," Garla said sharply. "As an outsider, you can't possibly understand the complexities of our society or the threats it is facing. We are living in precarious times, and even many of our own people seem to be blind to that fact." She briefly glanced at her husband when she said this, before considering everyone at the table again. "We will need to make sacrifices, all of us, to ensure our continued survival as a people. Not all of us will agree with the kind of choices we will need to make, but in the end, they will be for the greater good. Personal desires and ambitions will be the least painful sacrifices we will have to make, Yintu. But the sooner you understand this, the easier it will be for you and for all of us to face the challenges ahead."

Louise got chills from Garla's solemn tone, not having expected a speech about the fate of Krellonian society at the dinner table. That this clearly xenophobic society had challenges, she had no doubt, even after having spent only a few hours on this world.

"Talking about changing the world again?" said Yorlo after her speech had caused a momentary silence to befall the table. He seemed least affected by her words.

"You really believe the world doesn't need changing?"

"Oh, I'm convinced that it does. I just don't believe you are the right person to do it," he said with such frankness that it seemed to stun most of the dinner guests.

Garla merely smirked at that. "Somebody has to try."

He nodded sadly as he poured himself more wine. "In that case, and for all our sakes, I hope you do not succeed."

Lif's grandmother cleared her throat loudly at this point, the only real sounds she or her husband had uttered since this conversation had commenced.

Yorlo got the message and raised his glass. "Apologies for any offense I may have been responsible for. None was intended. I suppose I just become a bit too passionate about matters when I get to enjoy such fine wine," he said and then took another sip.

The dinner hosts had heard enough and without so much as uttering another word, both of them stood. This quickly prompted everyone else at the table to stand as well and Louise too scrambled to her feet, even though she had been in between bites.

Lif's grandparents considered Garla and Yorlo with momentary contempt, and as far as Louise was concerned, they seemed to have reserved most of their annoyance for Yorlo.

The waiters understood their gesture as well and quickly stepped up to pull their chairs back and to allow them to leave the table. The large, ornate doors were opened and they promptly left the dining hall without uttering another word.

"Oh my, looks like we've ruined a perfectly good dinner," said Yorlo after the family elders had left.

"I think that was mostly your doing," said Garla who also stood. She glanced toward Lif. "Do you mind joining me for a few minutes? I wish to speak to you in private."

Lif exchanged a glance with Louise and then nodded to his aunt before stepping away from the table as well and following her into a side room.

Sanu looked slightly embarrassed by all this but still offered Louise a gentle smile. "We are very glad, my husband and I, that Lif has brought you to his home."

Louise nodded. "The pleasure ... uh ... is all mine," she said, hoping that her lie was not too transparent. She hadn't been dishonest when she had mentioned her own disagreements with her parents, and she was certainly no stranger to arguments at the dinner table, her parents, after all, had divorced when she had still been a child, and yet none of the discord in the Chirac-Hopkins household had quite rivaled the drama she had witnessed here.

"We do hope that you will enjoy the rest of your stay here," said Nimtu, and then both he and his wife left the dining hall as well, making sure to collect their youngest son, ostensibly to have a very difficult conversation with him about his future plans.

This left just Yorlo and Louise in the large dining room, along with the wait staff that seemed poised and ready to spring into action at any moment.

The older man looked at her with a small smile playing on his lips. "So, how are you enjoying your visit so far? As you can probably tell, we don't get many Federation visitors."

Louise desperately wanted to sit back down and continue the quite exquisite meal in front of her, the succulent aroma still tickling her nose, but even Yorlo remained standing and it seemed a breach of some sort of protocol, apparently, to sit back down after the elders had left. "It's been an interesting experience," she said truthfully.

"I'm sure it has. Starfleet officers are quite well known to be avid explorers. At least that is what I have heard."

She nodded. Even though perhaps in her case this wasn't entirely true. She had after all joined Starfleet primarily to get a chance to work on complex machineries like warp engines and EPS regulators. Traveling to distant worlds had ever only been a secondary consideration, even if that. If she was being completely honest, after her experiences so far, she didn't regret her choice of spending most of her time in Starfleet in an engine room.

"I know that our little empire doesn't rate compared to the massive Federation. I suppose we have a much more provincial mindset here. People like my dear wife for example have very strong views on what we should be and how we should act. But let me assure you that this is by no means reflective of Krellonian society as a whole."

Louise blushed slightly, realizing that she knew far too little about Krellonian society after having dated not just one but two Krellonians over the last year. Then again, she was beginning to understand why

both Lif and Gedar has been less than forthcoming about sharing any details about their home.

She ultimately nodded. "I would not presume to make any assumptions."

He laughed at that. "Ah yes, that famed Federation equitability in action, I see. Well, I am not sure how well this kind of worldview will serve you in the Krellon Empire." He reached down to grab a green breadstick off his plate before washing it down by draining his glass. "Well met, Louise Hopkins."

"And you."

Yorlo offered a parting smile and then quickly headed for the exit himself.

It left Louise alone by the table save for the staff. She looked over the extensive meal, finding most of it hadn't even been touched yet, individual plates more than half full still. It felt wrong to continue the meal by herself but after a moment's worth of deliberation, she decided that it be worse to let it all go to waste.

She sat back down determined to at least finish her plate, the food, after all, had been amazing, even if the dinner conversation had been anything but.

Before she could even raise her fork, however, the waiting staff simultaneously attacked the table from all angles and quickly and efficiently began to clear every last dish and plate, including hers.

She looked up at the insectoid waiter who had snatched her plate just before she had been able to dig back into the meat dish but he—or she, she wasn't sure—didn't even make eye contact.

Within just a few moments, Louise sat at the table all alone, the hall entirely cleared with no evidence of any meal ever even having been served at all.

"Drat."

\* \* \*

Lif had hardly spoken more than two words to her about the dinner after he had returned to the room they shared and afterward had claimed to be too tired to talk.

So Louise had spent the rest of the night partaking in one of her favorite activities: reviewing technical journals. Lif's father had been kind enough to make a few available to her.

They featured a wealth of information on Krellonian starship design, most of it was, of course, declassified material relating to civilian spacecraft, and none of it was truly revolutionary or advanced compared to Federation technology, but nevertheless, as a dedicated, lifelong engineer, she was always curious to see other perspectives on the tech she worked with regularly.

The next day had promised to be a busy one. Louise had asked him before they had even arrived about any interesting sights to visit while they were on Krellon and Lif had told her about the City of Stone, one of the most popular tourist attractions on the planet and one not too far from where they were staying.

They had made plans to leave early in the morning and then spend most of the day discovering what promised to be—at least for Louise—an impressive natural wonder of sorts.

They departed just a couple of hours after dawn, taking a short trip in a land vehicle to a nearby transportation hub to jump onto a vactrain, a high-speed train traveling inside a vacuum tube that could reach speeds in excess of one thousand kilometers per hour.

Like she had witnessed in the city they had arrived in, everything seemed very modern, clean, and well maintained, not unlike something one would expect on a Federation world. She received a reminder that she wasn't on one only shortly after they had boarded the train and they walked through the main aisle to find a place to sit for the short twenty-minute ride.

The issue wasn't space, as there seemed to be plenty, the problem, it turned out was that Lif couldn't decide if they should sit in the forward section almost predominantly favored by Krellonian travelers, or the back where off-worlders tended to sit.

Louise found the entire thing rather silly and scowled at him for his indecisiveness, however, apparently, her annoyance was nothing compared to how other Krellonians felt about the issue, judging by the looks they were receiving from when they considered sitting in the forward section of the train.

Lif ultimately decided to remain standing near one of the exit halls instead and Louise didn't offer any protest considering the short trip.

The frustration of their travel arrangements was quickly forgotten when they arrived at their destination. The City of Stone was appropriately named and like nothing, Louise had ever seen before.

From an observation platform located outside the city, they had a fabulous view of the valley below that featured what looked like a literal

forest made out of stone. Almost as far as she could see, tall but thin stone slabs were rising into the air, many of which were at least twenty to thirty meters tall. Lif had told her that these had all once been trees that had petrified millions of years ago but, more amazingly, the majority had remained intact, creating a petrified forest.

Interspersed between those stone slabs stood large circular towers that reached even higher into the sky, clearly man-made structures, they had been built thousands of years earlier by an indeterminate early Krellonian culture and under mysterious circumstances. It apparently baffled historians who had been left unable to tell with absolute certainty if the structures, some of which near one hundred meters tall, had been built as domiciles or for some other purpose.

Regardless of the mystery builders' motivations, the City of Stone had become not only a popular tourist attraction but also a source of pride for Krellonians and evidence of the great resourcefulness of their ancestors.

Louise couldn't wait to explore the area in greater detail and the two of them set out on a winding trail into the valley.

She quickly found that the City of Stone resembled a maze once they walked in-between the petrified trees and the even more massive towers. If not for meticulously placed signs and directions, it would have been all too easy to get hopelessly lost inside this labyrinth of stone.

"This is truly marvelous," she said to him as she craned her neck back to look up at the massive stones surrounding her. She stumbled slightly but Lif caught her before she could fall. "Sorry," she said. "I think looking at it too long gives me vertigo."

He nodded with a smile. "I know. It wasn't until I was older that I could even come here without fearing that I get squashed between the stones."

They continued to explore the forest, discovering several clearly ancient markers and carvings that had been made not just to the man-made towers but also to the petrified trees. Most of the towers were accessible and hollow inside, which was probably the reason why some anthropologists believed that they had been designed as habitats, Louise thought. There was little left inside them however to support that theory.

"What did your aunt want to talk to you about last night?" said Louise just after they had stepped out of another tower. "She struck me as quite an intense person."

"She is. She takes her work very seriously. Perhaps even more so than my grandparents. And she has some strong views about our culture."

"I could tell."

"She's not a bad person," he said, "she's just very concerned about the direction our society is going. She told me about the work she is involved in. She wasn't all too forthcoming about details, but she has big plans to reshape Krellonian society. To be honest I'm not sure if I should be scared or impressed with the scope of her ideas."

Louise stopped and turned to look at him. "Why is she telling you this? It didn't sound to me as if she approves of your life choices."

"She doesn't. I suppose she still hopes that I'll leave Starfleet and come back to Krellon. I think she believes that my experiences would be valuable to her work."

Louise smiled. "Of that, I have no doubt."

But Lif was not convinced. "I'm a pilot, Lou. I can navigate a starship pretty well, not exactly the right skill set to shape the future of an entire people."

She frowned. "Don't sell yourself short. You're a leader now as well, especially after everything you—we all went through during the war. Hell, they gave you a medal for commanding *Eagle* through a battle which by all accounts you should have lost, didn't they?"

He turned away. "Not an experience I like to dwell on."

"Funny, here I thought becoming a starship captain was on top of your wish list."

Lif didn't respond to this right away, instead, he studied a few circular markings carved deep into a petrified tree in a seemingly endless loop. He used a finger to trace the carvings. "That was before I knew what it felt like to lose people who depend on you, who trust in your ability to lead them."

She nodded, even though he couldn't see her. She felt much the same way. She had never entertained any kind of command ambitions of her own, but as a chief engineer on a ship of the line, command came with her job, at least as far as the engine room was concerned. It was the part of the job she liked the least and one she knew she wasn't very good at. "I don't think I'm the right person to give you advice on that front. But if command is something you truly want, and I know that you do, I'm convinced that you can overcome this. Besides, nobody ever said that commanding people was easy. On the contrary."

When Lif didn't speak for a few seconds, she stepped closer to him and then realized that he was no longer studying the carving at all, instead, he was looking past the stone tree and seemingly into empty space. "Lif?"

"Do you see that man in the green jacket," he said without indicating.

She followed his gaze and then did notice the short, silver-haired man standing about fifty meters or so away, seemingly taking great interest in the markings adorning one of the larger towers. "What about him?"

"I'm sure I've seen him earlier when we went into that tower and even up on the platform before that."

She shrugged. "So what? Just another visitor taking in the sights."

"Maybe."

Louise reached for his arm and gently pulled him around to face her. "You think he's following us?"

"Sound crazy?"

"To be perfectly honest, a lot of things I've seen on this world seem rather crazy to me."

He gave her an embarrassed look. "Yeah."

"Let's find out," she said.

"How?"

At this, she smirked. "I'm an engineer. If I come across a hypothesis, I need to test it until I'm convinced it's either wrong or accurate. And I usually start with the easiest possible method. Follow me."

And with that, she set off and Lif followed. She walked quickly and took random and sudden turns through the petrified forest, stepped into towers by entering from one side only to step back out the other, and she continued with this pattern for at least ten minutes.

"I really hope you're keeping track of where we're going," said Lif.

"I thought you did."

After five more minutes, they both came to a stop in between two particularly close trees that had been carved with perfectly even lines from the bottom almost all the way to the top.

"I think we may be lost," said Lif.

"At least we can say for certain that we're not being followed."

"Unless we were and we just lost our tail."

"Possible. But my engineering wisdom tells me the simplest explanation is usually the correct one."

He frowned.

"What?"

"But sometimes not. Green jacket, eleven o'clock."

She turned her body slightly to pretend that she was looking at the carvings and then dared a quick glance. Sure enough, the exact same man as before had reappeared. "Who do you think he is? Could he be part of the security forces? Maybe they have me under surveillance. I didn't exactly feel a lot of love from your authorities concerning my presence here."

Lif shook his head. "No doubt my people are paranoid but this man looks nothing like a security officer."

Louise ventured another glance and couldn't help but agree. He was of diminutive stature, looked thin, had shaggy hair that was not tied together in a ponytail as was customary for most Krellonians and even his beard looked unkempt.

"Let's split up," said Lif. "You keep going straight and I'll circle back."

She smiled. "And we catch him in-between us."

He nodded and they set out.

The plan didn't quite work as Louise could quickly tell that their mysterious stalker was not following her as expected but Lif. Louise made the quick decision to circle back herself and within a few moments, she could see the stranger again, following Lif. Lif stopped and Louise continued, trapping their stalker.

"How is it going, friend? Enjoying the sights?" said Lif, challenging the other man while Louise continued to close in.

"I love this place. Come here at least once a year."

"Except for today, you're interested in something else. Or is it somebody else?" said Louise as she stepped closer, making sure to keep a safe distance from this man. Even though he looked too small and feeble to pose a serious threat, she had paid enough attention in Nora's tactical training classes to know not to underestimate a possible opponent because of their stature.

The man turned to consider the human woman approaching him from behind before he turned back towards Lif. "I guess you caught me. Nice try though, attempting to shake me."

"Who do you work for? Local Security? Alliance Navy? Or is it the Eye?"

The stranger laughed. "None of those."

"Then who are you and why are you following us?" said Lif.

"It's really just you I was after and to be honest, I was hoping to get a chance to speak to you. I would have approached you regardless, so there was no need for this little game."

Louise carefully moved past the short man to be able to face this stranger while standing next to Lif. "Well, next time you want to talk to someone, maybe just do that, instead of stalking after them like a spy."

He nodded and uttered another little laugh. "I suppose you are right. My name is Urat and I've actually been following your career for a little while," he said looking at Lif. "Or as much as I have been able to. It's not always easy to get news from the Federation around here. But I know that you are just one of a handful of Krellonians in Starfleet and that you are a lieutenant on a major starship, which makes you one of the most high-profile Krellonians outside of the Star Alliance."

"What of it?"

Urat seemed to consider his next words and ultimately decided to address Louise instead. "What is your impression of our world, if I may ask? As a human, I take it you were born and raised on one of those enlightened Federation worlds. How does Krellon compare."

It had been a question that had played on her mind for a little while now, of course, and ever since they had first crossed the border into the Star Alliance. It was, however, not something she had yet discussed with Lif, considering his reticence to speak of anything to do with his people, even now that they were among them. She suddenly felt uneasy to open up on this subject to a stranger and in front of him.

"We're not here to swap notes on comparable anthropology," said Lif, doing little to mask his rising anger. "You're interrupting our vacation. A well-deserved one, I should add. And we could really do without all this."

"I appreciate that," said Urat but then glanced back at Louise. "But please, humor me, if you don't mind."

She nodded slowly. "Well, I can see that your people have a truly rich and impressive history," she said and indicated toward their surroundings. "This place right here is a great example of the achievements of the Krellonian culture. I've also had a chance to see quite a bit of your infrastructure, and as an engineer, I would consider it comparable to Federation technology in its efficiency and its low environmental impact," she added and then tried to remember what else she had learned about this world since her arrival. "I studied several technical manuals, and I can safely say that Krellonian space aviation

technology has some very interesting concepts that seem to work to great effect.”

Urat simply smiled at her while she spoke, as if he knew exactly what she was doing. “You are right and I agree with all your observations. But tell me, besides our historical monuments and our technological advancements, what do you think of our society in general? Of our people and the way that we treat each other?”

She glanced back at Lif and could see a light of sorts turning on behind his eyes. His annoyance grew visibly. “I know what this is. You’re working with some sort of social justice campaign, don’t you? And you’re trying to recruit me for your agenda.” He shook his head. “I’ve told people like you before, I’m not interested in politics. I’m a Starfleet officer, I have duties and responsibilities.”

“You are also, first and foremost, a Krellonian. Your first responsibility should be to your people,” he said, the rising passion now evident in his tone, demonstrating quite plainly how strongly he felt about this issue. “People outside of Krellon know next to nothing about us, about our society and the injustices that take place here on a daily basis. And this is just how the government likes to keep things. You can make a difference to—”

“I’m not listening to this,” he said and turned away.

Louise reached out for his arm to keep him from walking away. “Lif?”

“No, Lou,” he said shaking his head. “This is nonsense. I know that this is not a just society, I have known this all my life. Why do you think I worked so hard to get out of here? But people like him are just as bad. Trying to incite racial violence and overthrow the government, creating chaos and destruction in their wake.”

“This isn’t about violence and chaos, this is about change. And if we don’t take action soon, that violence you speak of, it will become unavoidable. You won’t recognize the Krellon you once knew.”

“That would probably be an improvement.”

Louise considered Urat again. “What I don’t understand is what you’re asking Lif to do about all this. I mean he is right; he is a Starfleet officer, he’s not an ambassador or a politician.”

“Believe it or not but the Federation is one of the Star Alliances’ chief trading partners. We depend on them a great deal for resources without providing much in return. But the Federation is being kept in the dark thanks to our government on how our society functions. Lif may not be a politician but he is an ambassador of our people if he

wants to be or not, simply by being a Krellonian. He could help us succeed where we have so far failed in bringing our struggle, the struggles of the Outlanders into the political spotlight.”

“Who are the Outlanders?” asked Louise, now clearly quite intrigued by what she was learning about this planet from this stranger, which was more than Lif had ever been willing to share with her.

“The Outlanders are part of our dark past,” Urat explained. “These days you can see them everywhere, the government once tried to hide them but that is just no longer possible. They are the people of the subject races we enslaved centuries ago. They are supposed to have the same rights as we do but in reality, they are treated like nothing more than second-class citizens. Once the Federation learns the truth of how entire races of people are treated by our government, it will force them to change their policies.”

“And to what end?” said Lif in a sharp, biting tone. “What would that achieve other than bring sanctions on the Star Empire and make people suffer?”

“I’m not saying it will solve all our problems, but it is a first step. To make Krellonians finally realize how wrongly we are treating those who are different from us. There are a lot more Kellonians out there who feel like I do, there are political movements that would gain real momentum from Federation sanctions.”

To that Lif uttered a sarcastic laugh. “Yes, or it could incite a civil war,” he shook his head. “I won’t become a political puppet. Not for you and not for anyone else. Stop bothering us.” And with that, he turned on his heels and walked away.

Louise remained a moment longer, staring at Urat.

“Change has to start somewhere,” he said. “Otherwise, we’ll end up just like this petrified forest you admire so much. A thing of the past, long forgotten. Sometimes all change requires is for one man to stand up and do the right thing.”

Louise quickly followed Lif and by the time she had caught up with him he was already trying to find his way out of the stone city, clearly, this unexpected meeting had ruined his mood and the two of them exchanged few words on their journey back to Lif’s grandparent’s estate.

As far as Louise was concerned, she wasn’t quite able to get Ultar’s words out of her mind, especially since she was suddenly unable to unsee the injustice and inequality between Krellonians and Outlanders everywhere she looked.

\* \* \*

One unfortunate downside of long-distance space travel was the fact that on many occasions the journey took longer than the time actual spent at the destination. This was certainly true for Lif and Louise's shore leave trip to Krellon, and after only a few days on Lif's remote homeworld, it was already time to pack up their bags and make the long journey back to Federation space.

Louise had spent most of the last two days on Krellon not with Lif but with his younger brother, and even though his earlier enthusiasm had clearly been dampened by what must have been a painful discussion with his parents about his career plans, he was still mostly upbeat and highly interested in what she had to tell him about the Federation while he showed her his world or at least the immediate surroundings of the estate he lived in.

The awkward silent treatment between the two of them continued until they were back at the spaceport, ready to board their shuttle for the trip back to *Eagle*.

But something felt very different about this city to Louise this time around. The first sign of trouble may have been the way everybody she spotted from the car window seemed to be in a great rush to get to where they were going. Foot traffic, in general, was much lower than last time they had been to the city which seemed odd since it was a similar time of day as when they had arrived. Vehicle traffic seemed equally sparse, a marked difference to the packed roads last time, that had caused an accident.

She glanced over to Lif at the controls and could quickly see the concerned look on his face as he steered the vehicle through the mostly empty streets and toward the spaceport. "Something wrong?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure. I hope it's nothing."

It was not nothing, that much was clear the closer they got to their destination. Perhaps the reason most of the city had looked deserted was because huge crowds had amassed near the spaceport and Louise immediately realized that this was probably not a good sign.

It took her a moment to notice that the vast majority of the people who were blocking much of the streets were non-Krellonians, Outlanders and that many of them were angry, shouting slogans she couldn't fully comprehend and holding up large signs she couldn't read. This was a demonstration and the Outlanders had come out in force,

most likely protesting against the government and its oppressive policies.

There were a few Krellonians among the protestors but not many. Security forces were everywhere and they looked just as angry as the protestors. Their vehicles were blocking off several intersections and small armies of heavily armored and armed officers were seemingly getting ready to engage the throng. Additional security vehicles were hovering overhead, shadowing the protestors below closely.

Lif's concern quickly grew by a few degrees when it became clear that there was no way to reach the spaceport in their vehicle and he had to stop a few blocks short. "Get out. We're going by foot the rest of the way."

She tried not to take offense at his snappy tone. "Are we just leaving the vehicle here? In the middle of the street?"

But Lif had already grabbed their carryalls, swung them both over his shoulder, and stepped out. "Let's go. Now."

It was rare that she heard that much anxiety in his voice. She guessed it was what he sounded like when he was piloting *Eagle* during a combat mission and it was enough to prompt her to leave their car behind and follow him quickly as they pushed themselves through many bystanders, mostly Krellonians shouting right back at the protestors.

The tension in the air was palpable as the two groups; the Outlanders and the security forces were beginning to converge on each other, neither side apparently willing to back down from an inevitable confrontation.

By pure coincidence, she spotted a familiar face at the front line of the largest group of Outlanders. Urat was among the few Krellonian protestors supporting the Outlanders and the short man would have been easy to overlook had it not been for his vocal support as he was among the loudest voices shouting at the security forces.

They had nearly reached the wide steps leading up to the main entrance to the spaceport, surrounded by more security officers who were clearly struggling with maintaining routine checks in the light of the events taking place on the street just in front of the building. It had gotten so bad that they had started to simply shove away any non-Krellonians who were trying to enter.

Lif reached in his jacket and fumbled inside a pocket for a moment before producing two bright red badges Louise had not seen before. He handed her one. "Whatever you do, make sure you hold on to this and show it to any security officer who looks your way."

She nodded and quickly took what looked like a pass of sorts.

That's when the explosion very nearly threw her to the ground and the small badge dropped out of her hand.

The entire crowd seemed stunned and her ears were still ringing as she turned to look toward the protestors. A police vehicle was on fire and pure chaos had erupted. The security officers had started to open fire on the Outlanders from all sides, including from the airborne vehicles overhead and the protestors were scrambling in every direction.

The security forces seemed completely indiscriminate in their approach, firing at everything and everyone that moved and Louise could see dozens of Outlanders go down immediately, among them Urat who took a couple of blasts to his chest before he collapsed right in front of her eyes. Judging by the way the energy blasts had torn into his clothes, these were not stun shots.

Louise instinctively headed toward the scene, realizing that nobody was looking after the wounded as the demonstration was quickly turning into a one-sided battlefield. She managed two steps before she felt a strong hand around her arm. Lif was shaking his head. "Don't. We need to get out of here," he shouted to make himself heard over the cries, the screaming, and the weapons' fire.

"There are injured people over there," she shot back, even though even as she said those words, she began to realize that she wasn't sure what she was going to do about that. Something inside her compelled her to try and help them somehow.

Lif shook his head. He had picked up the badge she had dropped and shoved it back into her hand before indicating in the direction of the spaceport entrance. "If we don't go now, we don't get out of here at all," he said and without waiting on a reply, simply pulled her arm as he rushed toward the entrance.

She had little choice to follow along, surprised perhaps by his intensity, not to mention the strong grip he had on her arm that was likely going to leave a bruise.

The crowd around them was thrown in chaos as well, clambering to get away from the battle on the street, and they both had to fight through a mass of confused and scared Krellonians who were desperate not to become collateral damage in the unfolding conflict. In the chaos, one of the bags Lif was carrying was torn away from his body and fell to the ground before disappearing under a stampede of Krellonian feet. Lif made no move to stop and retrieve it. For an instant, she wondered

whose bag had been lost but she had no chance to free herself and find out.

The security personnel around the spaceport were in a state of near panic now, half of them moving into the streets while the rest aggressively kept anyone out of the building they were assigned to secure.

Louise began to doubt that they would be allowed through but apparently whatever those passes they were holding up indicated, the guards seemed to part whenever they noticed them, even disregarding her alien origin for the first time since they had arrived. She assumed that Lif had obtained the badges from either his grandparents or his aunt for exactly this kind of eventuality.

They managed to get inside where they had to push themselves through another squadron of security officers who were rushing out of the building to support their colleagues, a few of which challenged their progress but only until they spotted those red passes.

Once they finally managed to board their shuttle, Lif wasted no time to lift off and take them toward orbit while Louise looked out of the viewport at the city below where she could see multiple fires now and the crowds of Outlanders and security personnel spreading out to the streets and allies all around the spaceport and beyond until the mad scene disappeared from view once they had broken through the cloud cover.

They remained mostly silent afterward, keeping their thoughts to themselves until they reached the Star Alliance's borders. Louise was hardly surprised to find a border patrol vessel once again having intercepted them just like when they had first entered Krellon space.

And just like before the humorless, no-nonsense border officers ordered them to come about and prepare to be boarded. Apparently, the government was just as paranoid about who left their territory as who entered it. Except for this time the boarding party took very little notice of her, except to register that she was departing Krellonian space—making sure she had not overstayed her government-mandated allowance for an off-worlder to visit Krellon space—and focused most of their attention on Lif, who was forced to answer several questions as to why he was leaving the Star Alliance.

Considering the kind of skepticism these officers showed in light of his explanations—apparently, their passes not as convenient with the border patrol as they had been planetside—Louise began to understand why it wasn't easy for Krellonians to leave their own borders. Lif must

have had his influential family pull a number of strings in the right places to facilitate him being able to join Starfleet in the first place.

By comparison, reentering Federation space a few hours later was an entirely painless affair that involved nothing more than a casual, long-range sensor probe by an automated relay station. No Starfleet Border Service cutter was dispatched to intercept them.

It was clear that Lif hadn't truly relaxed until they were safely back within Federation space, almost as if a heavyweight had been lifted from his shoulders. "It's good to be back."

Louise threw him a puzzled look. After all, nothing about their surroundings had changed to indicate that they were back within Federation borders. It was still colorful and star-crammed space as far as the eye could see.

"Oh, come on. After everything we've just gone through, there is no way you don't feel the same right about now."

"Maybe, but that's your home we're talking about," she said as she massaged her arm that was still sore from earlier.

"Hasn't been much of a home to me in a long time."

She thought about that for a moment. "You don't care for it anymore because of the way they treat the Outlanders?"

"Because of that. Because of the completely backward mentality that rules that place. My people's isolationism has brought out the ugliest side of xenophobia. You've seen it with your own eyes. It's not a place I would wish on anyone."

"And yet you're perfectly happy to do nothing about it."

"That's what this is, isn't it? The reason you have barely spoken more than two words to me since we came back from our little trip," he said and stood from the pilot chair to take a few steps toward the back of the shuttle. "I told you I didn't want to go back to my world. But you insisted."

She also stood. "Well, I didn't know it was because of that. You could have mentioned something."

He turned to face her. "Right. And what do you suppose I should have said? 'Hey, let's not go see my people, they're all a bunch of backwater bigots and xenophobes.'"

"Maybe that would have prepared me somewhat, yes. I don't blame you for the philosophy your society has adopted. I just don't understand how you can just turn your back to it all so easily. Even when others are trying to get your help to bring about some kind of change."

He shook his head. "Don't make me out to be an apologist for my people. I'm the first to admit that there is something rotten about that society. And it has been for much longer than I've been alive. It has been like this for hundreds of years, ever since my people ventured into space and brutally conquered their neighbors and nearly wiped them out in the process and then subjugated those that remained not unlike Klingons," he said and sat down again. "For decades the Outlanders were treated as second-class citizens, like slaves really."

"Doesn't look to me it has gotten much better"

"It has changed a little bit. There is a strong sense among my people that the systematic genocide that we were responsible for was a terrible crime. But nobody was ever held accountable for any of those actions. For a long time, it was argued that the assumed superiority of our culture gave us the right to mistreat others. Some still believe this to this day and a true reconciliation has never really taken place."

"In the meantime, the Outlanders continue to suffer. Which brings me back to my initial point, Lif. Why don't you at least try to do something about it?"

He avoided her insisting glance, looking out towards the stars instead. "Because I can't. You said it yourself, I'm a pilot on a Federation starship," he said and looked back at her. "Do you really think that the Federation Council will change policy based on my recommendations? And say they did? What then? The Prime Directive forbids direct interference with the internal matters of foreign governments. Yes, sanctions would hurt my people, but I don't want to be responsible for people suffering or going hungry because of what I started."

"People are already suffering."

"Don't you think I know that?" He shot her a piercing glare. "It's pretty easy for you, as an outsider, to spend a few days on my world and say that our society is broken and demand that I do something to change it. I have spent half my life there."

"But you're not even trying, Lif, that's what I cannot understand. This isn't the first truly unjust and crooked society in history. There are so many examples from the history of my own world, about people being denied basic rights and being mistreated by their fellow man because of their beliefs, their gender, or the color of their skin. But nothing ever changed until somebody stood up and said that enough is enough. I'm not saying you can change your world, but at least try, and perhaps others will follow."

For a long moment, nobody spoke and the cabin was once again filled with nothing more than the subtle droning of the shuttle's warp engine.

"You can't just apply your human morality to an alien world, Louise. They teach us that on the first day at the Academy. I have tried, in my own ways to make a difference before I left for Starfleet," he said and shook his head again. "And as much as I tried, I couldn't find a way to make even the smallest bit of a difference. Yes, I chose to get away from it all, to turn my back on my people and live my own life. Maybe that makes me a coward but to be honest I don't care. And I'm sorry that you feel like you can judge me based on this, but you haven't walked even a mile in my shoes, you don't know what I've seen and what I've done. So perhaps before you get onto that high horse of yours and you talk down to me about how I've failed at doing right by my people based on what you have seen, maybe think about the things that you don't know about. Maybe think about how much easier it is to judge than to truly understand what it is you're talking about."

She didn't have words to respond to this straight away and Lif, who had clearly worked himself up while speaking, didn't give her much of a chance as he stood and walked into the back of the shuttle to put as much distance to her as possible.

She desperately wanted to tell him that she wasn't judging him but on second thought she wasn't sure if that was even true. Maybe she had without even fully realizing it. All she knew for certain was that he had been right about at least one thing.

It had been a mistake going to Krellon.

And the journey back was going to be much longer than it had been getting there.

The story continues in  
**Quantum Divergence**

## Resurrection<sup>2</sup>

2306

At forty-eight degrees centigrade, it was practically a balmy day in the Vulcan's Forge and not an unwelcome respite from four continuous days on which the thermostat had reached well past fifty-five.

Logic dictated that he found shade and rested during the hot days while only making his way through the relentless desert during the much cooler nights. And he understood that it was the most common method to endure the *kahs-wan*, the traditional Vulcan survival test that many Vulcan children undertook to prove their courage and resiliency before embarking on a life's journey dedicated to pure logic and pragmatism.

But the eleven-year-old Xylion still had over two hundred kilometers to cover before reaching the Plain of Blood that marked his final destination and the progress he had made over the last six days of this ten-day excursion had been unsatisfactory. The decision therefore to travel under the bright hot Vulcan suns during the day had been one born out of necessity.

Xylion had never been a strong boy. He was shorter than the average Vulcan child of his age and not as adept at physical activities as the majority of his peers. Xylion had taken to academia much earlier than Vulcan children, preferring to work out his cerebral muscles over his physical ones.

His father, realizing that the extremely demanding *kahs-wan* ritual was likely going to be a challenge his son would not be able to overcome, had argued against this undertaking. But both Xylion and his strong-willed mother had disagreed. Ultimately, it had been Xylion's own arguments, deeply rooted in logic of course, that had ensured that he was cleared for his desert marathon.

He had trained relentlessly for a year for this undertaking and had thought himself ready when he had been dropped off all by himself deep inside Vulcan's most inhospitable region with not much

more than the clothes on his back, some water and food rations, and very basic tools and the expectation that he cover a significant distance of sandy and rocky terrain in just ten days without any assistance.

It had been after the second day that his doubts had begun to manifest themselves when he had failed for a consecutive day to reach the aim he had set himself. His own logic was beginning to work against him, trying to convince him that at his pace, it was physically impossible to reach his destination in time.

And more than that, he was becoming more and more convinced that he might not even survive the desert at all. He found it increasingly difficult to find shade, water, and food. At one point during his third day, he had failed to heed the first signs of a sandstorm that had very nearly swept him down a dangerous-looking chasm, only saved by a small rock outcropping, not much taller than himself, he had lain there for hours, holding on for dear life until the storm finally abated and he was able to find more suitable shelter.

He had expected that armed with an ironclad, logic-infused resolve, no challenge would be impossible to overcome. But no matter how much he willed it, deprived of enough food and water, little by little his body simply refused to obey his mind's demanding commands.

His young logic, which he had believed had steered him so well over the last few years, which had given him the confidence that he would be able to survive this harsh gauntlet, that very same logic was slowly but surely leading him to an inescapable conclusion: He was going to die in the Forge.

Giving up and surrendering to this fate, however, seemed to him as illogical as the chance of his eventual success. Torn between those two extremes, he had little choice but to press on.

Ultimately, it wasn't the harsh conditions, the unrelenting heat, the freak sandstorms, the lack of water and sustenance, or the seemingly insurmountable distance he still had to cover that would spell his doom.

Toward the end of the sixth day, exhausted and hardly able to set one more foot after the other, even the lowering temperature didn't come as much of a relief as the Vulcan suns began to set.

Xylion trotted at a snail's pace toward what looked like a more than suitable cave for shelter and much-needed rest. Maybe even to close his eyes for two or three hours before he needed to set out again if he wanted any hope of reaching the Plain of Blood in the time he had left.

Had he been less fatigued, with his mental facilities working at their usually sharp pace, he might have realized sooner that those very caves were the preferred dwellings of some of the local wildlife.

Instead, Xylion wandered right into the path of a ferocious *le-matya*. The young Vulcan froze as he came face-to-face with the wild beast. The green and yellow apex predator had at least three hundred kilograms on the diminutive Vulcan boy and responded to the intrusion into its layer with unbridled aggression, its large paws wide apart, each with three razor-sharp black claws digging into the dirt, its head lowered low to the ground, looking up at what would make an easy target to pounce on.

The beast snarled at the boy, revealing a pair of jutting fangs, its long tapered green ears standing up at attention while its long green and yellow tail wagged dangerously.

For a moment the two, Vulcan and animal, simply stared at each other, Xylion not moving a single muscle while the *le-matya* uttered a low, angry growl that left little doubt to its intentions. The intrusion was not going to be tolerated. Instead of hunting for dinner, dinner had come to it.

The stare-off lasted a good ten seconds before adrenaline finally kicked in with a vengeance, almost instantly dispelling the cobwebs that had clouded Xylion's fatigued mind and he could feel his muscles tensing not unlike those of the predator in front of him.

Fight or flight was no choice at all, and an instinct honed for tens of thousands of years asserted itself before Xylion could even think about calculating his odds. With strength and agility he had not felt in days, he jumped to his side just as the *le-matya* made its move. The beast had miscalculated and had used too much force on its attack, and instead of tearing into a helpless victim, it smashed painfully against a large, jugged bolder instead. The animal howled in pain and anger and Xylion took the opportunity to run.

Straight out of the cave and down into a canyon that he considered to be the better option than heading into the open desert.

He ran as fast as he possibly could, leaping over rocks with an agility that had escaped him up until that point. He could hear the *le-matya* hissing and growling somewhere behind him, but he never looked back as he continued deeper into the canyon with blazing speed, hardly even noticing that the ground was becoming muddier as he went.

Xylion didn't slow down until he found the canyon in front of him splitting into two paths.

Slowing down had been a mistake but thankfully he had sensed the impending attack before he heard it and ducked and turned sharply to the right only to see a large mass of green and yellow leap over his head, missing him by a few inches.

He avoided the wildcat but in doing so he lost his footing, slipped, and with a loud moan hit the wet, muddy ground at an incline. Vulcan's strong gravity immediately took hold of him. He tried to reach out for a few rocks to slow his fall but it was to no avail.

He bounced half a dozen times, each impact harsh and painful, before he landed on his back, slipping uncontrollably toward a sudden drop up ahead. He went over the edge and into a freefall before splashing into a watery surface and immediately submerging below it.

If Xylion had prescribed to the sentiment, he might have considered it ironic that he had landed right in the one thing he had been looking for the better part of the day, the real irony of course being that the one thing he had needed so desperately was now threatening to drown him as he sank steadily lower.

Somehow, however, he managed to fight himself back to the surface and thanks to a weak current, washed up against the shore. He crawled the last few meters out of the water and then collapsed onto his back.

It was an odd melody that awoke him what must have been hours later, since he could see Vulcan's sister planet high in the dark sky above him, indicating that it was well into the night.

Propping himself up slowly onto his elbows, the next thing he noticed was the waterfall that dropped into a small lake from about fifty meters above and from which he had fallen. The basin below the waterfall was not very wide but as he had since painfully learned, it was deceptively deep.

Besides the steady sound of the water cascading down the canyon, something else had caught his attention, something that did not sound as if it belonged in this place.

He slowly made it back onto his feet, his clothes still wet, he took a moment to look around until he thought he had determined the source of the odd sound. As he stepped closer to it, an unusual warmth began to spread across his skin, but none that he was familiar with, none he had ever experienced before. This was not thermal radiation created by Vulcan's twin stars, or even by artificial means, this was something else entirely.

The tiny hairs on his arms began to stand on end as he carefully approached what he believed to be the source of this strange phenomenon. Then he spotted the soft azure glow, seemingly dancing on top of a layer of sand.

Curiosity more than fear drove him even closer. Xylion was well aware of several naturally occurring events in the Forge, including sand fires that often sprang up with little warning, created by static electricity.

But this was like nothing he had ever seen or read about. This seemed and felt entirely alien. Not from this world.

He carefully knelt in front of the dancing lights that behaved not unlike a wave of energy, rippling across the surface of the sand.

Something within it was calling out for him, he was certain of it. He didn't recognize the language, couldn't even tell if it was language at all but there could be no doubt, there was an intelligence behind it.

Logic told him to proceed with the uttermost caution and yet he found his hands moving almost of their own accord as they gently made contact with this unexplained energy. There was no danger, it would cause no harm. How he could possibly know this, he could not rationally explain.

Xylion had never performed a mind-meld in his young life. He had, of course, read about the practice that was usually frowned upon in his society, and intellectually he understood what it involved. And he understood the inherent dangers of merging one's mind with another.

And yet he offered no resistance when he felt an alien and unknown consciousness touch his own. He instantly understood its

need. That, whatever it was, could not survive like this for much longer and in an odd twist of circumstances – humans may have referred to it as fate – he quite possibly could not survive without it.

It seemed, and more importantly, it felt, like a perfect match.

## May 2376

Xylion was a very different man now, barely recognizable from the young, timid boy he had been seventy years earlier when he had set out on his *kahs-wan*. He was older and wiser, of course, his resolve firmer and his logic sharper than it had ever been. But he had also grown physically into a tall and strong man and not just because of his Starfleet career.

Many things had changed for the young boy in that desert decades ago. He had found something there he would never have expected. Not courage or the strength to overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges. He had found, quite literally, another soul. An alien spirit wandering aimlessly through the desert, like Xylion, confused and lost and perhaps even scared.

For many years after this unlikely encounter, Xylion had been unable to account for how this alien presence had arrived in the Forge or how it had subsequently managed to merge with his own consciousness. But that it had, of that there was no doubt.

After finding the source of the odd energy on that fateful desert night, he had felt it flow into him and after just a few hours, take occupancy in his mind. The intrusion hadn't been violent or painful and he had not fought it. It had not, as far as he had been able to tell, altered his mind or his own thoughts. Instead, he had simply found himself shaking his head with another individual.

It had saved his life.

Just as ambiguous as its presence on Vulcan and its origin, was the effect it had on him once they had become one. New and never known strengths seemed to emanate from this merger, his tired and exhausted body had seemed like reborn, his logic that he had spent so many hours honing, reassured itself with crystal clarity and purpose.

Against all odds, Xylion had reached his destination in the Plain of Blood with time to spare, requiring very little rest, food, or water. While most persons would have broken down for days after such a startling metamorphosis, Xylion simply found that it had crystallized his resolve to reach his goal, his new imperative not just to save his own life but to ensure the survival of this parasite as well.

After his return to civilization, Xylion had not shared this remarkable experience with anyone, not even his parents, and instead spent much of his next few years studying this phenomenon in as much detail as he could. Coming to learn to live with another voice in his head was of course a challenge, especially since Bensu, as he had introduced himself over the years, was nothing like a Vulcan. He possessed emotions, or rather, did not suppress them the way Xylion did. In the early days of this forced cohabitation of minds, the young boy had questioned his own sanity more than once, wondered if he had truly mind-melded with an alien being or if that voice in his head was merely a sign of a mental condition, he had contracted from his near-death experience in the Forge.

But as was usual for him, even at a young age, he had turned to logic and slowly but surely ruled out the possibility that his mind was failing him. On the contrary, he had displayed such an impressive mental fortitude, that he began to understand and accept that he had become the host to another consciousness.

And soon Bensu became more than just a voice inside his head. He became a friend and his closest confidant. How could he not be, considering that he had access to his every thought? A human or another emotional race might have been unable to cope with such a situation, with losing total privacy within one's own head. But Xylion had thrived under these conditions.

It was thanks to Bensu, and Xylion's own unquenchable curiosity as to his origins and how he had been able to take residency in his mind like a Vulcan *katra*, that had driven him to join Starfleet, against his mother's wishes.

It was the reason why he had once more elected to spend his leave from *Eagle* visiting his homeworld. Not to reunite with family or friends but to revisit the place Bensu and Xylion had first become one. To retrace the same steps, he had first made so long ago. To

Xylion it was nothing short of a revelation and a chance to find answers to decades-old questions.

"I positively despise this blasted wasteland."

Xylion glanced at his companion who was nearly a head shorter, dressed like he was in all-white Starfleet desert fatigues, his hood hanging into his dark face and the long robe billowing slightly around his boots.

"A wasteland implies a barren region, devoid of life and activity. The Forge has a significant population of flora and fauna."

He nodded. "Yes, I know. Most of which is trying to eat us."

Xylion raised an eyebrow. He knew Bensu well enough to understand his tendencies to exaggerate and use colorful language to underscore his arguments. It was, of course, a common practice among more emotional species. It still confounded him to some degree that after the many years they had spent together, very few of his calmer, reasonable, and more logical ways seemed to have made much of an impact on Bensu.

The other man considered Xylion for a moment. "I know what you're thinking, old friend. Why must I remain so terribly illogical after all this time? Why could I have not become more like you? Ever wonder why you didn't become more like me?"

His response remained another raised eyebrow.

"One would think that after sharing one brain for so long, you would have had a much easier time off-world, getting along with all those awfully illogical people out there."

"I have no compunctions working with non-Vulcans."

Bensu uttered a chuckle before he found a large rock and sat down to remove one of his boots. "Maybe now you don't. But we both know it's not always been like that."

Xylion said nothing to that. It was difficult to argue with a man who knew his head inside out. And the facts seemed to support his point. He had not lasted long in Starfleet after leaving Vulcan and had quickly decided to return to his homeworld. He had not left Starfleet but taken a transfer to a local and planet-bound role instead where he had stayed for decades, mostly working with the Vulcan Science Academy, and partaking in significant and notable research projects, many of which were able to support his more personal and clandestine quest for answers.

Bensu turned his boot upside down to watch the sand come pouring out of it. "I really don't know what we are doing back here. It's unbearably hot and dry, there is nothing to see unless you count sand, and judging by the way this wind is picking up we might be in for a storm of the ages. This place nearly killed us both once before, why are we so desperate to give it another chance?"

Xylion referred to a standard tricorder he had brought. "According to my calculations, a category five sand fire will engulf this region in approximately twenty-eight minutes, which would make it one of the most powerful sand fires ever recorded on this continent."

Bensu's eyes widened with surprise and he jumped back onto his feet, struggling to put his boot back on while hopping after Xylion, clearly not quite having expected for nature to catch up with them so imminently. "What in the world are we doing down here then? We should get out of this thing's way as quickly as we can. You full well know that sand fires are nothing to joke about."

But Xylion seemed unimpressed. "Indeed. However, I believe that we will be able to wait out the sand fire in a nearby cavern system."

Bensu just shook his head. "The same cavern that is the home of the meanest, most infamous *le-matya* this side of the Plain of Blood? I think I'd prefer returning to the shuttle."

"That will not be an option."

"Why not?"

"We lost contact with the shuttle twelve minutes ago due to the increasing electromagnetic interference caused by the approaching sand fire."

"So let me get this straight, you decided to come to one of the most dangerous places on this entire planet in the middle of sand fire season, putting not just your life in jeopardy but mine as well. What possible reason could you have for such madness?"

Xylion didn't immediately respond and instead glanced at the tricorder again, after which he quickly increased his pace.

Bensu followed suit, dread already spreading across his face.  
"What now?"

"Sand fires can be unpredictable this time of year. It appears that this one has picked up speed and intensity. We must expedite our efforts to reach the cavern."

Bensu had no arguments to offer save for one. "If we survive this, you'll owe me one serious explanation."

By the time they reached the cave, the wind had picked up quite a bit and both their long desert fatigues were rippling against the strong gusts beginning to build up and howling across the desert. The static electricity in the air was palpable and the first sign of the vicious electromagnetic storm that would soon turn this part of the Forge from an inhospitable wilderness to an outright nightmarish landscape of sand, wind, and fire in which little could survive.

Xylion quickly led Bensu into the cave entrance, the very same he had entered seventy years earlier as a child. This time he walked confidently but without abandoning caution and deep respect for the creatures that usually inhabited these places.

They both switched on their wrist beacons to illuminate the dark cavern as they moved deeper and further inside to get as far away as possible from the entrance. Xylion had produced his tricorder again and it hummed softly as it scanned their surroundings.

"Anybody home?" Bensu asked.

But Xylion closed his tricorder and returned it into the pocket of his cloak. "As I expected, the storm is interfering with my scans. We will have to rely on our senses."

"So what you're saying is that it's between being cooked alive outside or ripped to shreds and eaten in here. If I have a vote in the matter—"

But Bensu stopped talking when Xylion gently touched his shoulder and then indicated for him to be quiet after he had caught his attention.

He nodded toward the deeper, darker end of the cavern and then for Bensu to head right and into branching passage.

Bensu responded with a frown, clearly not happy about this but when Xylion insisted with a persistent look, he relented and slowly trotted off.

Xylion for his part turned off his beacon and proceeded deeper into the cave, staying as quiet as possible.

Bensu couldn't shake the feeling that he had made a terrible mistake as he slowly made his way through the passage that didn't really seem any less dark than the one Xylion had chosen. After just a few meters, he was certain he could hear someone or something else in the cave with him. He stopped and shined his light back the way he had come from.

Finding nothing there.

With a heavy sigh, he continued, taking just one small step at a time and desperately trying to figure out why Xylion had believed that splitting up had been a good idea.

It wasn't long until he heard that first hiss and once again stopped in his tracks. There was no more denying it. He was not alone.

The light of his beacon caught the yellow and white streak jumping in his direction and he ducked just in time to avoid contact.

The full-grown *le-matya* was not pleased at all by his intrusions into its layer, this much was clear when he finally managed to steady his light enough to fully capture its angry, hissing face with its razor-sharp teeth.

"Nice kitty?"

The wildcat was getting ready to pounce but just before it was going to launch itself from its powerful hind legs to hurtle toward its prey, the massive animal whipped its head to the side.

Bright orange light filled the otherwise dark cave, striking the *le-matya*'s side with perfect accuracy. The creature hissed loudly before it collapsed.

Bensu directed his beacon to the far end of the cave to illuminate Xylion, calmly standing in the open and securing his weapon.

"What in the name of Surak was that?"

Xylion raised an eyebrow. "A female Regarian *le-matya*. By its body language and behavior, I estimate it to be roughly thirty-two years old, however, a more detailed analysis would be required to determine its exact age."

"I know it's a bloody *le-matya*, the razor-sharp teeth and the bad attitude were a dead giveaway. What I want to know is why you didn't tell me that you were going to use me as bait?"

Xylion walked over where the beast's body was now slumped on the cavern floor and knelt next to it. The way that mountain of green and yellow fur still rose and fell ever so slightly gave proof that Xylion had merely stunned the wildcat. "The likelihood of your objection to the plan would have caused a significant delay in its implementation, which would have led to us losing the element of surprise vital for the plan to succeed," he said as he stood again once he had been satisfied that the *le-matya* no longer posed an immediate threat. "I further deduced that had I made you aware of the plan beforehand, you would have eventually agreed to it, once you had understood the logic of it as well as the limited danger it posed to your safety. However, as I mentioned, we did not have the time for you to arrive at that conclusion."

Bensu fumed. "Better to ask for forgiveness than ask for permission, is that it?"

Xylion sat down on a nearby boulder, as he continued to look at his old friend. "I have also estimated that you will show indignation over my decision for the next six to eight minutes until you decide that it is a wasted effort and that my logic was unassailable. Would you prefer to take that entire time to express your aggravation, or shall we skip that step and agree that I made the correct choice?"

He had kept his voice so perfectly neutral and without any indication of smugness or arrogance it only helped to infuriate Bensu further. "Are you made of flesh and blood or are you a damn computer? Honestly, sometimes I really cannot tell anymore."

His eyebrow climbed upward in response. "We have shared one mind for sixty-one point three years and you are still astonished when I am able to predict your responses. Is that not curious?"

Bensu uttered a heavy sigh and found another rock in the dark cavern to sit down, except that it took him a few attempts until he felt even remotely comfortable on the hard, jagged surface. "I guess I should not be surprised. It just seems like common courtesy to me that you would tell a person before you intend to place them in front of a wild and hungry beast and risking his life and limb."

"I shall consider that on the next occasion we need such a strategy. Time allowing."

Bensu said nothing to that. Instead, he had decided to ‘punish’ his friend by not speaking at all for a while. Of course, that plan was doomed to fail since Xylion didn’t crave conversation and was perfectly content to remain sitting quietly in the dark for as long as necessary. Bensu was not.

He only lasted a couple of minutes or so during which time the only sounds he could hear was the muffled crackle from the intensifying sand fire outside.

Ultimately, he had to admit, even if only to himself, that Xylion had been absolutely correct, or at least logical to a fault, as far as his plan had been concerned. He would be damned, however, before he admitted as much out loud. “All right, so now that we have slain the beast, what’s next? Do we just sit here and wait for that storm to pass?”

“Correct. From my last readings, the sand fire will reach category six strength within the next two hours. It may last up to four additional hours to subside.”

“Earlier you said it was going to be category five, one of the most powerful storms ever recorded.”

“This one will most likely break the previous record.”

“And with us right in the middle of it.”

“This cave should provide ample protection.”

“Should? That doesn’t sound like your usual confident self.”

Xylion didn’t say anything further on the subject and all of a sudden Bensu found himself desperately wishing that he’d be the one to keep talking to elaborate his point, using his impregnable logic to reassure him that they were, in fact, perfectly safe.

But the Vulcan refused to do so.

Giving up on having his mind put at ease, Bensu got up from the hard rock he had chosen as a temporary seat and headed for what looked like a moss-covered patch on the ground. After inspecting the surface carefully, and testing it out with his boot he finally determined that it would make for an adequate place to rest and placed himself on top of it. “Not sure there is any way to get comfortable in this place. Sometimes I can’t help but wish I were still in that noggin of yours. Didn’t have those kinds of worries back then.”

## 9 Years Ago

2367

Xylion found his modest home in the outskirts of Sh'calla, the city of his birth, exactly how he had left it when he had departed Vulcan three years earlier.

The few belongings he owned, including his sparse furniture, remained untouched. Even the four, fern-like plants that decorated his living space and his bed-chamber were precisely the same size as when he had last seen them. And even though nobody had lived in this space for seventy Vulcan months, there wasn't a spec of dust or dirt in sight.

Of course, there was nothing unusual about this, after all, Xylion had arranged for a caretaking service before he had set out and Vulcans prided themselves in ensuring that anything they looked after appeared exactly the same way on the final day as it had on the very first day they had taken on such a responsibility.

Therefore, Xylion took no time whatsoever to take in his home he hadn't laid eyes upon in three years, after all, everything was the way it had been before. He carried with him a medium-sized shoulder bag but it contained no personal items or clothing. Everything he had needed had been provided to him while he had been away and like most Vulcans, he didn't believe in taking with him personal mementos or trinkets.

"*Welcome, Xylion,*" said the monotone computer voice upon having registered the homeowner's return. "*You have three waiting messages.*"

Xylion didn't even slow down on his way to his study. "List all messages in the order in which they have been received."

"Message one: Sender T'Nal."

His mother. It was not surprising that she would be in touch as soon as he had returned from his expedition. No doubt the message included an invitation to their home to discuss his future plans and to convince him to take on a permanent position on Vulcan, instead of remaining with Starfleet. It had been a conversation they had repeated often since the day he had left Vulcan as a young man to join Starfleet Academy. The fact that he had returned home after only

two years to join the Vulcan Science Academy as one of their many Starfleet liaison officers and an astrophysics specialist had only ever given her more ammunition in this decade-long argument.

"Save message," Xylion said, determined to review it at a later date. He had more urgent matters to attend to.

The computer beeped obediently. "*Message two: Sender Vice Admiral T'Lara.*"

Xylion knew that Admiral T'Lara was the current head of Starfleet Sciences and was likely getting in touch to discuss further details about Starfleet's recent decision to award him and the rest of the expeditionary team a special award for breakthrough scientific study. Even though he had been the only member of the *Soval* to be a member of Starfleet, it had been found that their collective contribution to astrophysical research was significant enough to award the citation to him as well as to the remaining civilians.

Xylion didn't spend much time concerning himself with awards, even if he appreciated the recognition for the work he and his fellow colleagues had undertaken during the three-year study jointly sponsored by the Vulcan Science Academy and Starfleet. He also understood that as a member of Starfleet it was probably not wise to keep a flag officer waiting too long for a response. He was, however, currently on leave and his present business simply took precedence. "Save message."

Another beep. "*Message three. Sender K'tera.*"

Xylion had just placed the bag onto his desk and then stopped suddenly when he heard that last name.

"Really don't think you should put her off. Not anymore."

Xylion ignored the voice in his head and instead opened the bag on his desk to retrieve a black case from inside it and place it on his desk. "We have more urgent matters to attend to."

"I am not going to argue over the implications of our latest find. Can't even deny feeling a certain sense of excitement over it but I told you before, she is not going to wait forever."

"Nor will she be required to."

"Xylion, last time you two spoke you told her you were planning on going through with it once you returned. Now that you are back it's only fair that you make good on your word."

He carefully examined the case, ensuring that no damage had come to it, before reaching for a tricorder he kept neatly placed in a drawer of his desk. "Unforeseen circumstance may require amending our previously considered timetable."

"Right. Just like the unforeseen circumstances of you suddenly deciding to go off into space for three years? If I didn't know any better, I would say that you have been doing everything you possibly can to avoid marrying her. And it just doesn't seem very Vulcan to — my, will you look at that?"

Xylion had opened the case to reveal what looked like a large piece of silver and reddish rock, glowing ever so faintly and visibly emanating a high level of heat.

"The object is still reading as an alkaline metal, similar to barium or radium, but the tricorder is not able to properly designate it."

"If the science labs on *Soval* weren't able to tell you for certain what this is, neither will your little gadget. But trust me, it is exactly what we need to complete the superconductors and merge them with the biological components of the prototype."

He closed the tricorder when it refused to tell him anything he hadn't already learned after discovering the strange metal on a barren planet over twenty light-years away. "I still do not understand how you can be so certain of this. This appears to be a hereto unknown chemical element."

"And neither do I."

"It must be connected to your origins."

"Maybe."

"I am not comfortable having hidden this find from my colleagues," he said as he continued to consider the pulsing rock. "I would prefer for it to be properly cataloged and presented to the Academy for further study."

"So that you can get another award? Sure, go ahead. But all they're going to do is probe it and study it for years and you will never get to see it again. Or use it for that matter. If you're serious about the prototype, we have to do it this way."

Xylion, of course, had already made his decision on this and Bensu knew this, considering that he shared a consciousness with the Vulcan scientist. After all, Xylion had spent a significant amount of

the last forty years on this project. One of the reasons he had returned to Vulcan after his short stint serving on a starship after graduating from Starfleet Academy had been to pursue this project in the privacy his own lab would afford him. He had claimed that he had not acclimated well working with so many colleagues who displayed their emotions so openly, but that had only ever been one of the reasons, maybe even the lesser one.

This was his life's work and thanks to Bensu, who had been an invaluable assistant over the years, he may have now finally found the missing piece to bring it all to fruition.

Bensu was understandably excited over what this would mean for him personally but even Xylion couldn't deny a certain amount of enthusiasm of coming so close to the realization of his greatest achievement. Even if he would never show any signs of such feelings openly.

"Let's get this thing into the lab already."

Xylion offered no objections as he quickly closed the case and returned it into his bag.

The computer beeped again. "*Please advise how to process the most recent message.*"

Uncharacteristically, Xylion had all but forgotten about the messages including the one from K'tera. "Save all messages," he said as he headed back out of his home. He knew he needed to focus his mind entirely on the monumental task ahead.

\* \* \*

The newly discovered element was incorporated into the prototype with little difficulties, once again relying on Bensu's inexplicable insight into the technical aspects of their work that had confounded them both over the last two decades during which they had jointly designed, developed, fabricated, and refined the prototype.

Of course, their chosen designation was somewhat misleading, after all, there were no plans to construct any additional versions it would have been near impossible to do so considering the amount of time, effort, and most importantly resources that had been expended for just one model. It had never been a plan to mass-produce. On the

contrary, its uniqueness was by design and very much an essential quality.

Now that the last, missing piece had been acquired and incorporated, a nearly twenty-year effort had finally reached its conclusion. All that was left now was to bring it to life.

Where to do this had been obvious. Ever since their first joining at the Forge, Bensu had maintained a connection to the place Xylion had later learned had been named Deep Oasis hundreds of years ago.

That connection persisted not just because his first conscious memory remained tied to that location, there had been something else and more unquantifiable that linked him to that place.

Xylion had since determined that it was part of the sensation he had first perceived, both through tactile stimulation as well as through thermal radiation, when he had first awoken there as a child after falling from the cliffs above. The inexplicable force that had drawn him to Bensu's *katra*, for a lack of a better term. And it had indeed been a form of radiation that his sensory equipment had been able to register, even if any kind of classification had eluded him for years.

It affected Bensu as well and perhaps even more significantly. It was the reason he was not fond of revisiting this place, even if he could not articulate this anxiety clearly to the one person with whom he was so inextricably connected.

Xylion had insisted on returning to Deep Oasis on numerous occasions after their joining, and particularly once he had reached adulthood and his focus on trying to understand Bensu's nature and origins had intensified.

Deep Oasis' remote location had left it undisturbed by civilization and yet rarely had any of their visits yielded significant insights.

This one was to be different.

Xylion had arranged a shuttle to transport the prototype and then used an antigrav unit to move the casket-like container into the exact position where he had first 'met' Bensu.

"What if this won't work?" the voice inside him asked.

"Then we will analyze the results and try to identify any possible faults preventing us from succeeding," he said as he prepared the container for what was to come.

"Of course. But what I mean is, what if something goes wrong? What if ..."

Xylion knew what he meant without it having to be spelled out. After all, to his knowledge, what they were about to attempt had never been done before. Certainly not in this manner. Xylion was not the first Vulcan or even non-Vulcan for that matter, to serve as a vessel of sorts for another consciousness. What his thorough studies on the subject had demonstrated, was that no Vulcan had ever possessed the *katra* of an unknown alien being before, and more importantly, nobody, in recorded history, had ever attempted to separate such a *katra* in the way they were about to.

"Considering the time and resources we have committed to this undertaking, this appears to be a most inopportune juncture to develop indecision on what we are about to endeavor."

"My dear, old friend, I may have been part of your immensely and impressive logical mind for sixty years, but I am not, nor will I ever be a Vulcan. It should be obvious that what I'm seeking now is some reassurance before we do what has never been done before."

Xylion raised an eyebrow even if there was nobody within one hundred miles who could have witnessed his facial expression. "In that case, I offer you my reassurances that we will proceed with an abundance of caution as we will bring to bear all the knowledge we have been able to accumulate over the last decades."

"It's times like these I wish I could sigh heavily."

"Perhaps soon you will."

And with that Xylion went to work, and even Bensu began to focus in earnest, understanding that they would both require their uttermost concentration for the next few hours.

First, Xylion removed the cover of the two-meter long container to reveal a seemingly unconscious body. Male, and not overly tall with the skin the color of deep copper, almond-shaped eyes, and a hairless head featuring four prominent, white bony ridges running perpendicular along the scalp. The body looked like no race Xylion had ever encountered before and yet Bensu had been able to implant a perfectly clear picture of this body in his mind.

Its outer appearance was not the truly revolutionary aspect of this body. Xylion was well aware and had spent significant amounts of time studying android designs, most notably those of famed

cyberneticist Doctor Noonien Soong. But the idea of crafting a fully artificial body had not appealed to Bensu, even if it could be argued that this was exactly that.

Instead, they had partly grown a synthetic body that was a hybrid of sorts, mostly biological in nature with only very few mechanical components at all. As far as biosensors were concerned, this body was real flesh and blood. Albeit currently entirely dead.

It was perhaps one of the greatest achievements of synthetic design known in the Federation and yet nobody was aware of this, thanks to the total secrecy in which Xylion had worked on this prototype. And he couldn't claim much of the credit for either its development or its construction. Most of that expertise had come from Bensu directly, even if he had been unable to explain how he had come to possess this knowledge.

The most critical step in bringing the prototype to life and making it more than a dead husk of flesh, muscle, bones, and blood was also one of the most dangerous. For this part, Xylion had to depend on what he had been able to learn about the Vulcan ritual of *fal-tor-pan*, the transfer of a *katra* from one body into another.

He had spent years studying this, spending long hours at a time with Vulcan priests and masters of this discipline to gain a complete understanding, never letting on that what he eventually planned to do was even outside their realm of experience or knowledge. And yet, as far as he knew, it was the only way to ensure Bensu could inhabit a body of his own.

A man of science, Xylion didn't believe in the ceremonial aspects of this age-old ritual, nor did he put much stock into unnecessary hesitation.

He carefully touched his own face, planting his fingers exactly where he would have done if performing a mind meld and mirrored that move on the prototype's face.

And then he closed his eyes and began to focus inward. His mind enveloped what in a sense was Bensu's essence inside himself. Bensu for his part needed to do much the same, focusing on who or what he was and where he existed inside a body and mind-space not truly his own.

It was an experience like no other for both of them, and while it felt somewhat reminiscent of their first encounter in this very desert

many years ago, it wasn't exactly comparable either. First and foremost, neither Xylion nor Bensu were the same person any longer, thanks to the vast experiences they had shared over that period of time.

The intensity of those experiences suddenly washing over him, without a filter or restraint, came as a surprise to Xylion, who was unable to remain on his feet and instead fell onto his knees while managing to hold on to the prototype's face.

He saw glimpses of another set of experiences, of another life he knew as not his own. The amount of information that washed over him was too much for even his disciplined Vulcan mind to process. And it rushed by him like a starship at high warp, with nothing staying behind as it all streaked past him with mindboggling speed. The only true sense he had of this experience was that it seemed to last for hours, an endless stream of fractured and jumbled memories. He couldn't be sure if he could even trust his perception of time while in this state as the world outside of his mind had ceased to exist.

A burning pain shot through his head followed by what felt like a terrible emptiness, like the never-ending vacuum of space itself. The dread this invoked was so beyond anything he had ever known; a terrible scream reached his ears and it took him a long time to realize that it was his own.

He heard a distant voice somewhere in his head and began to focus his thoughts solely on that in order to avoid the pain he felt. He thought it sounded vaguely like Bensu, except muffled and extremely distant.

His first fully cognizant thought in his mind was that whatever they had attempted – incredibly foolishly, considering its extraordinary scope – had ended in failure since Bensu's voice was still there, inside his mind as it had been for decades.

He opened his eyes to see the stars.

A few moments passed until he caught up with the reality of his situation. He was lying flat on his back in the sand, staring up at the clear night sky. It had been early morning when they had started the experiment.

The voice was still there.

"Xylion."

But it didn't come from inside his head.  
A shadow fell over him and the prototype stood above him.  
"You look a lot taller in person."

## Present Day

The sand fire had lasted well over four hours and when Xylion and Bensu reemerged from their shelter, they found that the storm had left their surroundings significantly changed. As far as Bensu could tell, the ubiquitous sand dunes had shifted dramatically and caused entirely new valleys everywhere he looked, almost as if they had stepped into a completely different desert.

It was only thanks to Xylion's tricorder that they were even able to locate the entrance to the canyon that led back toward Deep Oasis and any sign of the small, meandering stream that had once run along it was gone.

Bensu feared that the sand fire had altered the landscape so drastically, they would not find their way back to Deep Oasis at all.

But as it turned out it was still there even if the cliff didn't appear nearly as high as it had before. The small lake at the bottom of the cliff had practically disappeared.

They unpacked the mountain climbing equipment they had brought along in their backpacks and then repelled down about fifteen meters.

Bensu immediately felt a familiar tingling sensation all over his skin the moment he had set foot on the sand again, something in this place had always caused this reaction in him, even when his consciousness had lived inside Xylion's mind. There was no doubt that he was inexplicably connected to this specific area of the Vulcan's Forge. How and why, however, he didn't know. His memories simply refused to go back any further than seventy years when he had first joined with a young, lost Vulcan boy.

But something was different from the last time they had come here.

While Xylion checked on their equipment, Bensu left it where it was and instead walked away from the cliff as if something was

calling out for him. He couldn't say what it was, only that it existed. Like a tractor beam homing in on him.

Whatever it was, it seemed to take him to one of the large rocks that surrounded the barely remaining lake.

He didn't recognize the oddly, almost cone-shaped rock but it was far too large and heavy-looking to have been placed there recently. As he stepped closer, he realized that the rock had indeed always been there, but the sand fire had shifted the sand surrounding it, revealing much more of the stone.

Bensu dropped to his knees in front of it and gingerly touched the rock. It did not feel in any way special but he was certain that something had pointed him to this exact spot.

Xylion joined him when he noticed his interest. "Have you found something?"

"I'm not sure. Something's here. Something that hasn't been here before. Or at least something we didn't notice before."

Xylion retrieved his tricorder again, flipping it open and pointing the scanning nodes toward the rock. "Curious."

"What?"

He waved the tricorder into other directions briefly to get comparative readings of their surroundings before coming back to the large boulder that was almost half a head taller than he was. "The background radiation levels appear to be stronger in the immediate vicinity of this rock."

Bensu looked up at him. "But this boulder has always been here, I'm sure. Is it possible that the sand storm somehow intensified the latent radiation to this level?"

"We do not have enough information to formulate a hypothesis."

Bensu's expression made it clear that he was not happy with that response.

"It is ... possible."

He nodded and looked back at the stone. From all outward appearances, it was just that. And perhaps, he thought, it wasn't the rock itself that was unusual, perhaps it was some sort of energy that had been released thanks to the intensity of the sand fire that had ravaged the area for hours.

He suddenly knew exactly what needed to be done. Bensu looked back at Xylion, right into his eyes. "Meld with me."

The Vulcan simply raised an eyebrow and Bensu knew why. Xylion was not entirely comfortable with this ancient Vulcan ritual and had only very rarely practiced it at all. It was hardly surprising that after spending the better years of his life sharing his mind with another person, that he wasn't exactly eager to do so again, even temporarily. As such Xylion and Bensu's minds had not touched again since their permanent separation and Bensu knew of only a couple of instances over the last ten years when he had been forced to make direct telepathic contact with another being.

"I am uncertain what you would hope to achieve by performing a mind-meld."

"There is something here, and I think it wants to make contact with me. But I don't have the facilities to do so. I need your mind as a bridge of sorts," he said and was sure he sounded us uncertain to Xylion as he did to his own ears. There was no scientific evidence to support any of this. It was merely a feeling and even then, he couldn't be sure if that feeling justified what he had proposed.

Xylion took a moment to consider the stone and then his surroundings as if he could glean another explanation for what Bensu was experiencing. "We know that the radiation levels in this immediate area have increased since the sand fire. It would be more prudent to fully investigate these new readings before deciding on a course of action."

But Bensu shook his head. "We've been looking over these radiation readings for decades, just because they are somewhat higher now doesn't mean we are going to learn anything else. And what if this spike won't last? What if this is our only opportunity to take action? We have to take advantage of this now."

Xylion remained unconvinced. "That is not a valid scientific argument."

He uttered a heavy sigh, pretty much having expected this from the man he knew so intimately. "Fair enough. But come on, Xyl, you're the one who wanted to come back here in the hopes to learn more about me and where I came from. I'm telling you that the way to do that is to perform a meld, not spending another decade pouring over data. Do you want answers, or not?"

It was an interesting reversal of roles, Bensu had to admit. Even though this had always been about his origins and his history, it had usually been Xylion who had driven any new discovery. It had been Xylion who had chosen Starfleet as a career to find a way to learn more about Bensu, and it had been Xylion who had chosen to dedicate much of his life to that task afterward. Bensu had only ever been in the passenger seat for most of this. A willing participant, certainly, but only a participant nevertheless.

This inexplicable feeling he was experiencing now, however, was prompting him into action like never before.

In the end, perhaps Xylion came to understand this change as well, realizing that for the first time since he had known him, Bensu was truly insistent on following through with something that could possibly lead to unraveling the greatest mystery of his life.

"Very well," he said. "Allow me twenty minutes to prepare. Whilst you wait, try to clear your mind of any thoughts not relating to this effort."

He smiled at that. "Sure, I'll just go ahead and flip the off-switch on my mind. No problem."

The empty look he received in return showed that Xylion was not in a joking mood. Nor was he really ever.

They both knelt quietly in front of that stone with their eyes closed until after exactly twenty minutes Xylion indicated that he was ready. They moved closer to each other and Xylion made contact with his face, just like he had done nine years earlier when he had successfully transferred his *katra* into an empty shell of a synthetic body.

What followed was both strange and familiar to Bensu. He immediately recognized a mind he had come to know well, one that had been a home to him for over sixty years, and yet it was also new and changed since he had last touched it. Experiencing it this way was very different than it had been before. Thanks to their familiarity they merged easily, and yet it was odd to have an entire body between them.

But this was by far not the strangest element. He could feel another presence with them and judging by Xylion's thoughts, he too was aware of this straight away. It wasn't exactly another mind, or even an intelligence but a force of some sort. And even though he

didn't recognize it, couldn't name it, he immediately knew that it was part of him. Something that had been left behind in this place when Xylion and Bensu had first merged.

It was difficult to explain, it was really more a feeling, a sensation and it felt like a whirlpool of energy, a stream of power known and unknown at the same time.

He resisted it at first, with Xylion providing a convenient buffer, but he could tell that whatever it was, it meant him no harm. He let Xylion know to let it through, to let it touch his mind unfettered.

And so he did.

It struck him like lightning.

He felt an immense force upon him in an instant, tossing him through the air like a ragdoll, and with such speed, it made him dizzy. The world around him changed as suddenly and so quickly all he could perceive was a blur. The impact was just as sudden and unexpected and it forced all the air out his lungs. Then everything went black.

\* \* \*

Bensu had no idea how long he had been out when he finally came to again but he knew that something was very wrong. Firstly, his own body didn't seem to respond to his commands, he couldn't move his arms or his legs and appeared completely paralyzed.

And if that by itself wasn't worrisome enough, he also quickly realized that he was no longer where he had started. Instead of in a desert, he found himself indoors somewhere. A hospital perhaps, which would make sense. Something bad had clearly happened during his mind-meld with Xylion and it had brought him here afterward.

His vision was too blurry to make out any details of this new place he found himself in, but he was certain he was surrounded by artificial light and no longer outdoors as he couldn't feel the powerful Vulcan suns warming his skin.

He perceived movement just in front of him and apparently it was enough to upset his seemingly fragile condition as it immediately caused everything around him to move as well.

His vision cleared slightly and something struck him immediately. This wasn't like any place on Vulcan he had ever seen. He was inside a building but its design was not reminiscent of Vulcan architecture. He wasn't sure if he had ever seen this style employed anywhere within the Federation.

Doors, windows, and even decorations employed pronounced triangular shapes with a strong focus on right angles everywhere he looked. Except, he realized, he wasn't actually able to move his head at all.

Bensu knew exactly what was happening, after all, he had lived his life in this manner for over sixty years. He had no control over the body he was inhabiting, he was merely along for the ride. But this time he couldn't sense another mind with him, certainly not Xylion. He was alone.

But then, who was in control?

Whoever it was, they moved confidently through the unfamiliar structure, clearly having been there many times before, and heading to their destination without hesitancy and with obvious purpose.

The more he saw, the more familiar it became to him. He had been here before, he was certain of this.

And while his surroundings became sharper and more recognizable with each step his host made, sounds mostly remained muffled and unintelligible. He spotted other people, shapes at first, unable to truly make out faces, and he heard distorted voices but was unable to discern what they were saying.

And then, little by little, pieces were beginning to fall into place and the world around him began to take on clear and familiar forms.

The Assembly.

Quagum City.

Celerias.

Those were names he had once known very well and they were coming back to him now.

He entered a large, triangular-shaped room, made to look even larger by the small number of people inside. The assembly hall had

been designed to hold a few hundred people and yet less than twelve were currently inside, all of them clustered around the wider, far end of the room.

Bensu joined them and quickly fell in with the smaller of the two groups that were standing at opposite sides of a large, three-cornered table.

Jetro was currently addressing the small crowd. He was by far the oldest person in the room, even though possibly only in body. He wore long robes and steadied himself against a simple cane he took wherever he went.

"It is not conscionable to keep this from the people any longer. They have a right to understand what is about to happen. They have a right to prepare themselves for what is to come in their own way. It is not too late to reverse our earlier decisions. To do what is right in the face of this calamity that will — that already has befallen us all."

Jetro spoke slowly and with great consideration as he had always done, ever since he had first met the elder politician and scientist some ninety rotations prior when his body had still been young. The older man had quickly become a teacher and mentor to him.

His audience was unmoved, however, and the leader of the opposing group simply shook his head. "Our decision is final and it has been final ever since we first made it. A panic will serve no one. This matter is closed."

"As is, it appears, the matter of dignity and decency," said Jetro, never shy to get in one last shot.

"This meeting is now adjourned."

Jetro and half the people in attendance shot the speaker confounded looks at the choice of his words. And from the pained expression on his own face, he too realized that his word choice had been poor. Of course, no precedence for this had ever existed on Celerias. Nor would this one become one for future generations.

"May the Soul Father have mercy on us all."

With those final words, the speaker and the rest began to stream out of the assembly hall.

Bensu caught up with Jetro outside the Assembly building.  
"So, what's next?"

"That's an excellent question, my young friend, isn't it?" Said Jetro as he looked up at the sky above which over the last few weeks had turned an increasingly darker shade of purple even during the night. As far as the general population was aware, this was because of an increase of solar radiation outputted by the Celerias sun. A temporary condition, the Assembly had assured the populace, albeit once that had persisted for the better part of seventy cycles and which had forced the majority of the population into hastily constructed underground cities.

"We have spent the last six hundred rotations thinking about what comes next. We have spent incalculable amounts of time and resources worrying about the continued survival of our species, and what have we come up with? Sleeves."

"Without sleeves, neither of us would still be around today," said Bensu.

"And maybe therein lays the problem," Jardo said. "We have been so concerned about keeping us going as a people, to maintain our memories, our experiences, our culture, we never once stopped to think about preserving that which we need most to survive. We've been so focused on making us immortal, we've never allowed a younger and fresher perspective to shape our destiny."

Bensu didn't respond to this, after all, he knew exactly what his mentor spoke off, and instead, he simply followed his glance.

Jardo raised his cane, pointing at the sky. "That's where our future could have been. That's where we should have focused our efforts on. Not spending all our time wondering what our next body should look or feel like. All this time we were looking inward when we should have looked outwards. That, my young friend, would have been our salvation."

The older man looked back at Bensu and a knowing smile formed on his lips. "It's too late for us now. But not for you."

Bensu shot him a quizzical look.

"Come now, after all this time, why keep up the pretenses?" he said and uttered a heavy sigh. "It doesn't much matter to me anymore. I have accepted what will become of us. Before all of this, I had always thought that one day I would have a chance to learn more about — the universe. I'm sure you would have been a great teacher, my young friend. Or should I say, old friend?"

Bensu didn't get a chance to respond.

"You take care now," he said. "And if you choose to honor the last wishes of an old, dying man, make sure you tell them about us. What fools we were. Maybe it will help somebody else avoid our mistakes." Jardo reached out for Bensu's head, using a finger to brush along one of his bony white ridges, a gesture of fondness in Celerian culture.

Then he turned and walked down the street. "Don't you forget about us."

There was not going to be a dawn for Celerias as mere hours later the purple sky turned fiery red and before any of the six billion Celerians could even wonder about this peculiarity, the solar superflare hit with such abrupt intensity that the entire surface of the planet was cooked within seconds before a subsequent shockwave ripped the planet apart to its core.

Celerian scientists had speculated that it had taken five billion years for their planet to form and develop life. It took a mere five solar minutes for it all to be annihilated.

Bensu had little memory of what had happened to him at the moment the superflare had hit. What he did recall was a sudden spike of heat that quickly grew intensely uncomfortable. A powerful force had pushed him onto the floor of his home and after that, the world had grown dark.

He hoped it meant that the end had come as painlessly for the population of Celeria as it had come for him. Except that just as Jedro had prophesized, the solar flare had not meant his undoing.

He recalled flashes of space, ongoing and seemingly never-ending. Planets and stars, pulsars, nebulae, and black holes, none of which he was able to name but he had no doubt he had touched them all in some form or another. He had vague recollections of stellar formations and of a journey through a spatial portal that had changed everything, and which had taken him from one corner of the galaxy to another.

Bensu opened his eyes and found Xylion looking back at him, still exactly where he had been when they had first started the mind-meld.

"Fascinating."

Xylion had seen what he had seen.

"That was ... a hell of a trip."

Xylion needed a minute to collect his thoughts, something that seemed out of character for him. But it was clear that the mind-meld had had a profound effect on him as well, having left him momentarily fazed.

Bensu was in no better shape.

Still on his knees next to the large rock, he let himself fall back onto the sand, shooting an empty look at Xylion who had been able to hold on to his posture. He began to nod slowly. "Celerias. I remember it now. Like a veil has been lifted off my mind. It was my home a long time ago."

"A species that appears to have mastered the technological and biological requirements to transfer their *katra*, their essence, into synthetic bodies. This explains the knowledge you were able to demonstrate while we developed your current body."

"Sleeves, they called them. In the end, Celerians were nothing if not obsessed over the practice, swapping bodies almost on a whim. Jedro was right, if they had spent just a portion of the time they dedicated on developing the perfect synthetic body on exploring the possibilities of space travel and colonizing other worlds, their civilization may have survived."

Xylion raised an eyebrow with curiosity. "Curious, you refer to the Celerians in the third person. Is there a reason you are not counting yourself among their number?"

He considered that for a moment. "I'm not sure, I wasn't even consciously aware that I was doing that."

The Vulcan got onto his feet, efficiently dusting off the sand off his robe. "I will have to consider what I have seen through your mind in more detail. But it appears clear that you survived the destruction of Celerias and I further believe that based on the stellar constellations I witnessed, not only was Celerias not in this quadrant, it may have been destroyed multiple centuries ago."

Bensu got up himself, standing on shaky legs and he needed to steady himself by holding on to the rock that no longer felt extraordinary in any sense. "But how could I have survived all that? How could I have traveled through space and for such a long period of time?"

"Those questions remain unanswered for now and I do not recommend that we attempt another meld so soon after what we have both just experienced."

He nodded and then uttered a little laugh. "And here we thought we might finally get to find out where I come from."

"We have. Or at least we have unlocked part of your history. It is a vital first step but much more work remains. In any case, we now know more than we ever did before."

Bensu looked skyward, the wide-open desert and the clear conditions giving him an unobstructed and unpolluted view of the darkening sky above and its millions of visible stars, each and every one seemingly teasing him with endless possibilities. "The answers to our questions, no doubt, are somewhere out there."

The story continues in  
**Quantum Divergence**

## When I Was a Child

May 2376

A starship like *Eagle* functioned very much like a self-sufficient entity, engineered to spend years operating independently in deep space. The *Nebula*-class was one of a handful of Federation starship designs that were able to truly fulfill Starfleet's charter and go where no one had gone before by venturing deep into unexplored territory for years on end. And considering the vast distances that made up the Federation, it was a rare occasion that she returned to her homeport around Earth's orbit.

*Eagle* had done little exploring over the last two years. Like the great majority of Starfleet ships, she too had been far too preoccupied taking part in the Dominion War and battling for the freedom of the Alpha and Beta quadrants, a seemingly insurmountable task that had kept her and her crew away from Planet Earth.

As far as Michael Owens could remember, it had been four years since *Eagle* had made the trip all the way back to the center of sector zero-zero-one. After that long and often excruciating war with the Dominion, many of the crew had jumped at the chance of taking shore leave while the ship itself was due for a major and overhaul at McKinley Station orbiting Earth.

Presently, *Eagle* was quite literally waiting in line for her turn to get her accumulated battle damage and other required maintenance seen to. Repair stations like McKinley in the solar system and other locations throughout the Federation had been working overtime since the end of the war five months earlier to attend to a battle-ravaged fleet.

Michael understood that *Eagle* had been relatively lucky in that regard. Countless ships hadn't survived the conflict, casualty numbers were staggering, and many ships that had survived the massive battles against the Jem'Hadar, Cardassian, and later Breen

forces had been damaged to such a degree that it had been deemed more efficient to scrap those vessels altogether.

*Eagle* had taken her share of damage in numerous conflicts but had been patched up efficiently enough by its crew or nearby outposts to continue her missions. She had never directly participated in any major fleet actions, such as the devastating Battle of Chin'toka or the Battle of Cardassia.

It wasn't as if *Eagle* had not been kept busy over those two, long years, undertaking various missions that in hindsight appeared to have been crucial in assisting the war effort, and sometimes, Michael couldn't help but feel guilty that they had been left out of those larger conflicts when so many had given their lives for the defense of their home.

Twenty-four hours after their arrival at Earth, and while the ship still awaited the opening of its assigned berth at McKinley, the interior of his ship felt like a ghost town as her captain walked its nearly empty corridors during the peak of alpha shift. He knew that more than three-quarters of the crew had taken the opportunity of extended shore leave, even many who did not hail from Earth were either spending time on the planet or had chosen to travel to other destinations within the Federation core and beyond.

Many members of the senior staff had also left the ship but Michael was surprised to find that at least one person he had expected to take full advantage of being temporarily sidelined on Earth was still on board.

It took two attempts before DeMara Deen responded to the annunciator and she allowed him to enter her quarters.

Even though the youthful Tenarian was currently serving as the ship's chief operations officer, Deen was a scientist by heart and education, and as such her inherent curiosity for everything new and unfamiliar was represented in the way she decorated her quarters.

She was a collector and yet had managed to keep her quarters tasteful and uncluttered, with only the most artful or impressive objects on display, such as a light-reflecting, spiral-shaped Iconian sculpture, a rare bust of an ancient Tkon emperor, a collection of small Hyterian figurines, a pre-Surak surrealist painting with such bold colors that it would most likely have offended most

contemporary Vulcans, and a maroon ceramic vase supposedly crafted by the legendary artist Mark Off-Zel.

Deen herself was sitting on her sofa underneath the large slanted, forward-facing window that was so prominently featured in most senior officers' quarters on this deck. She had her knees up against her chest with her arms wrapped around her legs as she was looking out toward the big blue marble *Eagle* was currently orbiting.

"Knock, knock."

She turned her head to regard him, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Who's there?" he said, trying to prompt her.

"It's you."

He sighed. DeMara Deen was a remarkable bright and intelligent woman and often demonstrated a level of wisdom one may have expected from somebody twice her age. And yet the blonde-haired, purple-eyed Tenarian had never fully grasped the inherent simplicity of a knock-knock joke. Michael was determined he was going to make her understand it someday, no matter that he had tried unsuccessfully for the last fourteen years and as long as he had known her.

He held up a padd he had brought. "I've noticed that you're not on the shore leave rotation, haven't even signed up for permission to leave the ship."

She offered a small smile. "Somebody has to stay and mind the store. Isn't that what you like to say."

Michael took a seat in a chair opposite her. "What is this really about, Dee?" There was little point to even counter her point, after all, she knew as well as he did that while in orbit, *Eagle* could practically take care of herself, and even the few crewmen and officers who had not signed up for full R&R were spending most their off-duty hours planet-side.

She shrugged her shoulders and looked back out of the window.

"I know Tenaria is a long way from here but I'm more than happy to authorize extended leave for you to go home and visit family if you like. We can handle things without you for a while."

"I almost did go."

"Oh?"

She nodded but kept her gaze glued toward the window.  
“When I went to Risa. It all went a little crazy and Anara convinced me to take her. It didn’t work out in the end. Things came up and we had to postpone our plans.”

He knew she and her Academy friend Anara Rysil, the Deltan first officer of the *Perseus* had visited the amusement planet Risa a few months earlier. At the time he had thought it to be an odd shore leave choice for her, considering that she wasn’t the hedonistic tourist type, but he hadn’t said much at the time. He had hoped that it would do her some good going to a place where she had to do little more than lying at the beach, enjoy the sun and get her every wish taken care of.

The war had not been good to DeMara Deen. It hadn’t been for any of them, but for somebody like her, who had never truly known war and who had grown up as a pacifist on her harmonious homeworld, he had feared that she had encountered such violence and brutality over those two years that it had forever changed her optimistic spirit. And for Deen that was what truly defined her as a person, the ability to always see the good in people, to see light when others could only see darkness.

“How long has it been since you’ve been home? Since you’ve seen another fellow Tenarian face-to-face?” he said.

“It’s been a few years,” she said but didn’t make eye contact.

“Exactly. The Tenarian delegation has traveled over a month to get to Earth and I know for a fact that Yeega has already asked about you. He would love nothing more than to see you again. I remember him from my time on Tenaria, he was always a chatty sort. Just the kind of person to catch up with about what’s been happening back home.”

Deen offered a very little smile. “Yes, he was chatty, wasn’t he?”

“Go down there and meet with him and the rest of the delegation. Be with your people for a little while. And who knows, maybe you can even book a trip back to Tenaria with them.”

She shook her head and that smile quickly disappeared again. “I just don’t think...”

"You don't think they'll be happy to see you again? Have you met your people? I guarantee you there isn't a race of beings more welcoming or magnanimous this side of the Virgo Supercluster."

She shot him an annoyed glance. "Considering that both Earth and Tenaria are within Virgo that would be difficult. And do I even need to point out that most of it remains unexplored? Thereby it is quite possible that there are many, many other races out there that could be much more magnanimous than my people."

"Well, sure, we could go out there and try to find them, but I think the ones we've got right here may be closer."

"Maybe I beam down to go meet Yeega if you go and talk to your father."

Michael was taken aback for a moment by the icy tone in her voice that was not like her at all and apparently, she had quickly realized how she had sounded herself and she quickly broke eye contact, almost as if she was ashamed of her own words.

"I will," he said after a moment. "In fact, he has already requested that I come to see him. Considering that he outranks me by a few pips, I can't exactly say no. I already had to postpone my shore leave arrangements because of that. Imagine Tazla Star's disappointment," he said, referring to his plans to introduce his rather skeptical Trill first officer to the wonders of Earth's coral reefs.

She nodded but said nothing as she looked back out of the window, avoiding the subject altogether. Michael had asked Star to accompany him only after DeMara had surprisingly declined his offer, even though she had greatly enjoyed their previous diving expeditions.

"Help me understand this, Dee. Your relationship with your people is nothing like what's been going on between my father and me. I'd even go so far as to say that it's the exact opposite. Why are you trying to hide away up here?"

She didn't respond straight away to this. But when she finally turned her head, Michael could see that her eyes had grown wet. "After everything that has happened over the last few years, everything I've seen ... and everything I've done. I just don't know if they'll recognize what I've become."

Startled by this revelation he walked over to her and held her in his arms, a gesture she welcomed as she easily sunk into him.

After the tight embrace, she looked him in the eye. "What if they don't accept me anymore?"

He wiped away a tear that was threatening to spill out of her eye. "They are like family, Dee. And I don't care where you're from, family sticks together. Yours will too."

She nodded very slowly, apparently starting to believe, or perhaps hope, that he could be right.

She swallowed and then stood from the sofa. "I suppose we'll find out."

\* \* \*

She was familiar with the human expression of having butterflies in one's stomach but had never fully understood the meaning of it until today. It was an odd sensation of anxiety and anticipation, bordering on all-out fear.

Preparing herself for the upcoming meeting, she had even changed out of her Starfleet uniform and had chosen to wear a more traditional Tenarian outfit, in this case, a white and green wrap-around dress that reached just above her knees. She complimented that outfit with a white sun hat that helped keep her inconspicuous among the many locals and tourists who were out and enjoying a warm and sunny Parisian afternoon.

DeMara was tempted to spend some time admiring the city as she crossed the impressive Place de la Concorde with its mixture of modern and historical structures. The most noticeable of which was the cylindrical, fifteen-story seat of the Federation government and the president, hovering over the Champs-Élysées on four large duranium beams.

But DeMara was heading the other way today, passed the two fountains and the Obelisk of Luxor and made a beeline towards the world-renowned Hôtel de Crillon.

Inside she quickly found the ornate reception desk and asked for the Tenarian delegation. The young man staffing the desk didn't need to look twice to be able to tell that she belonged to that same race, if her bright purple eyes and golden locks did not give her

away, her unmistakable aura which surrounded her people and who affected so many other humanoids was a dead giveaway.

The man smiled at her and felt noticeably uncomfortable when he had to explain that he had to check her identity first, which he managed to do quickly thanks to her status as a Starfleet officer.

Once the computer had verified her, two burly men in dark suits and wrap-around sunglasses accompanied her to the elevators. These men, she realized were part of Federation Security's diplomatic protection detail. Entirely humorless and completely immune to her charms, they weren't interested in the least in striking up any conversation after they had verified with compact tricorders and a brief visual inspection that she was unarmed.

She was escorted to the top floor where they came across another four security officers who looked nearly identical and promptly carried out yet another check. DeMara took all this in stride, understanding the need for security when it came to foreign delegations, especially so soon after the end of the war. It also didn't escape her notice that there were no Tenarians standing guard anywhere. She was not surprised.

When she was finally led into one of the larger suites, she felt those butterflies acting up again.

Yeega who had been a close family friend and who she had always considered as fondly as an uncle, was there to greet her and she quickly realized that he had changed little since she had last seen him half a decade earlier.

As was typical for her people, he was tall and statuesque. Yeega was in his mid-fifties but thanks to the youthful appearance of her species, could have easily passed as ten years younger. His skin was much darker than hers and his golden hair was cut short. His purple eyes sparkled with the same intensity they had when she had been a child and he had read to her from her favorite books about alien races and space travel. It had been Yeega who had awakened in her the desire to travel the stars even before Michael Owens and his Starfleet explorers stumbled over her planet.

"Dee, it is so good to see you again." He was all smiles as he hugged her tightly and just like that, all her worries seemed forgotten as she sunk into his comfortable embrace like she had when she had been a child.

He introduced her to half a dozen other Tenarians, a couple of them she remembered as people working with her father who had been a senior government official even when she had been young. They all sat down in the spacious living area of the suite and began to talk about all kinds of things. She was surprised how much she found she enjoyed their company and the stories from back home. She avoided speaking about herself, tried to avoid talking about the last two years as much as possible, and was relieved to learn that Tenaria, thanks to its remote location, had escaped the war entirely untouched by its violence.

After an hour or so, DeMara suggested a tour of the city, and Yeega and a few of the delegates agreed. And while she wasn't exactly a local, she had been to Paris enough times to know of the most popular and even a few not-so-well-known attractions.

The imposing Eifel Tower was of course one of their first stops, followed by a visit to the Louvre, and private showings of such masterpieces as Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, Jean-Antoine Watteau's Nymph and Satyr, Johannes Vermeer's The Astronomer as well as works from famed abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock on loan from the Museum of Twentieth-Century Art in New York, and several stunning holo-art spacescapes from Jhothaa Sh'ari from the Royal Conservatory on Andor.

The famous Notre Dame, the Arc of Triomphe, and the Champs-Élysées were of course also on the list of must-see destinations but DeMara also made some time to take the delegation to some lesser-known places like the downright creepy catacombs filled with seemingly endless amounts of exposed skulls and bones, the unusual Defender of Time mechanized clock in which a man seemed to be stuck in an eternal struggle against a dragon, and one of her favorite locations, the Musée des Arts et Métiers, which was filled with a wide collection of scientific and industrial instruments from Earth's past.

DeMara had always considered Paris one of Earth's most impressive cities, ever since she had first arrived on this alien world to attend Starfleet Academy and had spent many countless hours here. If she'd had the time and opportunity, she would have gladly shown Yeega and his delegation most of what she had discovered in the city over the years she had been on Earth. In the end, they had to

make do with only two days, hardly enough time to even scratch the surface of what the City of Light had to offer.

It wasn't until the evening of their second day, while she was having dinner with him at the glamorous dining room of the Hotel Meurice, overlooking the Tuileries Garden with its considerable collection of sculptures hailing from all over the planet and beyond, that she had felt comfortable enough to broach the subject she had been so concerned about.

And while no member of the delegation had shown any sign of concern for her whatsoever, there had been a few occasions during their tour of the city that she had felt a subtle disconnect between her and her fellow kinsmen.

"What did you say this is called again?" Yeega said as he had another spoon of his dish.

She smiled at his enjoyment of the local delicacy. "Soupe à l'oignon or onion soup, very popular in these parts and one of my all-time favorites."

He nodded and promptly had another spoonful. "I must say the local cuisine is just as impressive as the art and architecture. If I lived here, I think I would eat this every day."

"So would I, to tell you the truth. Our replicators don't really do it justice. But I suppose this is hardly surprising, France is considered one of the greatest culinary locations on this planet."

He grinned. "I can see why the Federation decided to make it its capital."

"I always suspected that the food must have played a role in the selection process."

Yeega wiped his lips with a napkin and uttered a little satisfied sigh. "I'm glad I came here, this is a truly fascinating place. We tend to spend so much time reading and studying about these places but far too rarely do we actually visit any of them." He took a moment to take in the lavish dining room. "The attention takes a little bit of getting used to."

DeMara followed his glance and unsurprisingly noticed quite a few patrons who had taken an interest in the alien pair. She had long since grown accustomed to the effect the so-called Tenarian Glow had on many other races, the way it attracted attention and tended to uplift people's spirit almost automatically.

This effect had been even stronger when the entire Tenarian delegation had traveled the city over the last two days, which had caused several occasions where people had spontaneously stopped what they had been doing and approached the Tenerians with wide smiles and great curiosity. None of the Tenerians had minded, of course, and it had led DeMara to once again become convinced that the reputation that Parisians were snobby and standoffish was blatantly untrue

She looked back at him and nodded. "Humans tend to be a friendly people. As are most of the races that make up the Federation. It's perhaps harder to tell with Vulcans and Andorians, but in my experience, they just show it in different ways."

"I can certainly understand why you have chosen to come here. There seems to be no better place to learn about the great diversity of the galaxy and the richness of all these cultures. And I say this after having visited just one of the many great worlds that make up this Federation."

This made her pensive for a moment, as she couldn't help but think back to how close they had all come to losing everything to the Dominion. When she looked back into Yeega's eyes she immediately understood that he could not possibly fathom such a threat.

Tenaria had simply been isolated for too long, experienced harmony for such an extended period, it was difficult for any of her people to appreciate what a struggle for survival felt like. It had been difficult for her when she had first left her home. "We paid a heavy price to keep hold of it."

Yeega could clearly tell that her thoughts had begun to drift to darker places. He reached out for both her wrists on the table, gripping them softly in a common Tenerian practice of showing support. "We all know of this terrible war you and the rest of the Federation have fought. And believe me, your parents and I offer you our fullest support. The things you must have experienced, it is difficult for me to even find words for it."

She nodded very slowly. "It is more than that. I mean yes, I've seen things I would never have imagined growing up. But I've also ... done things." She uttered a nervous little laugh. "I guess I don't know the words myself."

Yeega was not deterred in his support. "I will not pretend to believe that I understand any of it, DeMara. I know I cannot. But I want you to know, that whatever you have gone through, whatever it is you had to do in order to ensure the freedom of the people you have sworn your loyalty to, we would never think any less of you. You are and shall always remain a favorite daughter of Tenaria."

She had to free one of her arms from his touch for no other reason than to wipe away a tear that had escaped her eye to streak down her cheek. She hadn't expected this kind of unconditional support and it felt like an unbelievable weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "I ... thank you."

Yeega quickly shook his head. "Don't be silly, there is no need to thank me. Remember what I told you before you decided to set out onto this journey of yours. Your parents and I knew that this would inevitably change you, but we were also convinced that whatever happened, the core of who you are and where you come from will never be shaken. And that you will always have a home with us."

She nodded slowly. "You have no idea what this means to me, Yeega. There have been times, not so long ago, when I thought I had lost sight of who I was. When I feared that I didn't recognize myself any longer and perhaps neither would you."

"Perish those thoughts, DeMara, I insist. Instead let us enjoy this time we have together, not to mention this wonderful food you have introduced me to."

She offered him a beaming smile even as she reached for her serviette to wipe her eyes.

Her worst fears had been dispelled. There was no doubt that the violence and intensity of the war had deeply affected her. She had lost people she had cared for greatly but she now also finally understood that no matter how much things had changed, she could remain safe in the knowledge that she was still herself. She had no illusions that this unexpected affirmation would miraculously heal all the trauma she had experienced over the last two years, but it was a step in the right direction. And hopefully a big step at that.

"Now that we've covered all that," he said as he continued eating his soup. "I would appreciate a little advice on what to expect when meeting those Federation officials for our talks tomorrow."

"I'd be more than happy to help any way I can," she said with a smile and began to impart to her old family friend everything she knew about Federation politics and policy only to realize fairly quickly that it wasn't nearly as much as she had believed.

\* \* \*

She didn't get to see much of Yeega over the next few days, mostly because he had a full schedule of high-level meetings with Federation politicians that kept him busy.

It hadn't stopped DeMara to spend as much time as possible, however, with other members of the delegation whenever they were available, making the best of her opportunity to be with her own people after not having come across another Tenarian for years.

She was pleased to find that they were just as understanding and welcoming as Yeega had been. She wouldn't have been surprised if *Eagle*'s resident counselor wouldn't have considered her reconnecting with her roots as a positive therapeutic step to healing the deep psychological scars she had undeniably suffered during the war.

She couldn't remember the last time she had felt this positive about not just the state of her world, but also about herself as well.

While she hadn't talked much about it, not even with Michael, the truth of the matter was that her life had drastically changed over the last few years. Of course, this much was true for most people living in the Alpha and Beta quadrants fighting the Dominion, but it had caught her so completely by surprise, for a long time she had not known how to deal with it at all.

The war had begun to fundamentally transform her from the person she had been, the person she liked and she was comfortable with, to somebody much darker and cynical. Something she could barely recognize when she looked at herself in the mirror each morning.

It had started, as it had for so many others, with the constant news of yet another lost battle, another world fallen and another piece of territory lost. Then there had been the casualty reports that

seemed to grow longer with each passing day until it was almost impossible to go through them without finding somebody she knew.

It had all begun to paint a very clear picture of an inevitable defeat that would mean losing not just people and territory, but their very freedoms and everything else she held dear.

That ever-encroaching darkness had made it more and more difficult to try and see any kind of light to cling on to, to find any hope that in the end things would turn out all right. After all, how could things ever be all right again considering what had already been lost?

She had held out longer than pretty much anyone else on board. She had continued to try to keep that smile on her face, understanding that many counted on her seemingly inexhaustible supply of buoyancy to get them through the worst of times. But even she had to admit that near the end, she could do little more than pretend, and perhaps that was the worst part of it all. That she had become a fake, a dishonest pretender who desperately clung to a lie because she was too scared to admit the truth. Bad enough that she could no longer muster the optimism that had been an integral part of her being, but the war had turned her into a deceiver as well.

The war had eventually ended and not one day too soon. But just when she had thought that perhaps there was a chance for things to finally get better, did fate deliver perhaps the most devastating blow when a very close friend of hers had died in her arms in an entirely needless and preventable death.

That shock had caused her to act out in a most unusual and in hindsight shameful way when she had directed much of her simmering anger and pain toward another friend while vacationing on Risa a couple of months earlier.

Since meeting with Yeega and overcoming her trepidations about the experience of the last few years having changed her in ways that had made her unrecognizable, she had come to the decision that no matter what she had gone through, no matter how much the events of the war had chipped away at her core being, she was determined to not let it defeat her. She was going to bounce back from the darkest days of her life along with the rest of the Federation.

For the first time in a long time, hope was once more as integral to her life as was the air she breathed, and spending time

with the Tenarian delegation was just what she needed to reaffirm this.

She returned to her quarters after another day in Paris in high spirits and found a message waiting for her.

“Who is it from?”

“*The message is from Saada Gwacham,*” the computer helpfully advised her.

She didn’t recognize the name but she still took a seat by her desk and activated the computer terminal. “Put the call through, please.”

The computer trilled again. “*The sender has left no voice message but has requested a call back at your earliest convenience regardless of the time.*”

That was a fairly unusual request, DeMara thought, but it clearly meant that this person wanted to speak to her urgently. “Computer, who is Saada Gwacham, and what is the local time at her location?”

“*Saada Gwacham serves as the Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs for the United Federation of Planets and is currently located in Marseilles, France. The local time is 2322 hours.*”

It was hardly surprising she didn’t know the name, after all, it was uncommon for an important government official to contact a relatively low-ranking Starfleet officer. It wasn’t difficult to guess what the call was in relation to, she knew that the talks Yeega and his delegation were taking part in were being held in the French port city. “Computer, contact Secretary Gwacham.”

“Stand by.”

After only a few seconds, the image of a woman of likely African descent appeared on her terminal. DeMara had a hard time placing her age, but judging by the faintest signs of wrinkles on her otherwise flawless skin and the way her short, dark hair showed just a hint of gray, she assumed that she must have been at least middle-aged and that she had come through to Gwacham directly and not an assistant or intermediary. Her eyes were slightly bloodshot, but from the looks of her business attire, she was still working, even at this late hour.

“Secretary Gwacham.”

*"Thank you very much for coming back to me so promptly, Lieutenant."*

DeMara nodded. "Of course. How can I help?"

*"I'll get right to the point. I'm afraid we're at a bit of an impasse and would greatly appreciate your assistance. Assistance you would be ideally suited to provide."*

*"This is about the Tenarian delegation, I take it? About Yeega?"*

*She nodded. "Yes. Now first of all let me assure you that my staff and I have the uttermost respect for Mister Yeega and his delegation. As you can imagine, in my role I speak to plenty of people from other cultures and societies, and I have rarely if ever encountered anyone quite like your friend. Your people's reputation of being gracious and unselfish is well deserved. They have easily charmed half of the Palais de la Concorde. Even the President is quite impressed after just a short meeting with the delegation."*

That caused DeMara to smile. She was glad that her people had made such a positive impression in the Federation's halls of power. It quickly vanished when she realized that Gwacham had clearly not contacted her because things were going well. "You mentioned an impasse?"

*"I'm afraid so. One of the main reasons we have invited your people to join us here on Earth is to discuss our Home Quadrants Security Initiative. Now, I won't be able to disclose many details as it is still classified at this point, but sufficient to say that Tenarian cooperation is quite important to ensure HQSI's success."*

DeMara leaned back in her chair, starting to see why Gwacham had encountered difficulties. "Surely you are aware that my people hold strong pacifistic tenants. If your security initiative involves any kind of military commitment, you are probably, as humans are fond of saying, barking up the wrong tree."

*Gwacham quickly shook her head. "We've done our research, Lieutenant, we are fully aware of the Tenarian non-violent philosophy. And our proposal does not require a traditional military obligation. It does however require each member to share certain intelligence, in this case, all we are trying to get the delegation to agree to is that they will allow us to deploy long-range sensor buoys to monitor certain areas in their sector. None of these platforms are even designed or calibrated to monitor Tenarian activity but are only used to detect any possible threats to the Federation as well as to Tenaria."*

"Are these sensor platforms armed?"

*"No. And our proposal includes that the platforms may be inspected and operated by Tenaria itself in case there are any concerns about their usage. But even those overtures have been rebuffed. The problem for us is that if we are unable to deploy these platforms, a crucial part of the security initiative, which is to provide an early warning system to a number of Federation and non-Federation worlds in relative proximity to Tenaria, is simply not going to be achievable because we will not be able to cover the required amount of space. As you can imagine, after the war, security is everyone's priority."*

"Except for my people."

*She nodded. "So it would seem. I cannot fully understand it. Everyone would benefit from this and the advantages seem immediately obvious. I was hoping that you would be able to speak to your delegation on this matter."*

DeMara didn't need to think about this very long. Everything that Gwacham had told her made perfect sense and she understood that sometimes her people had difficulties grasping concepts that related to security and defense. She offered a sharp nod. "Leave it with me, Secretary. If you could send me everything you are able to share with me about this proposal I will make sure to speak to Yeega and make him see the advantages to be gained from this."

Gwacham offered a little smile, the first one she had cracked since the call had commenced. She tapped a few commands on a nearby terminal. *"I have sent you everything I can safely declassify just now. And I'm grateful for your assistance with this. Gwacham out."*

DeMara transferred the data she had received onto a padd for some bedtime reading, determined to have a good long chat with Yeega the following day.

\* \* \*

Gwacham had arranged a two-day hiatus to the conference and DeMara had taken the opportunity to return to Paris to meet up with Yeega in his suite in the Hôtel de Crillon. As had been the case the other day, Yeega was more than happy to receive her.

She had not given him any indication of what it was she had wanted to discuss with her but he was smart enough to figure out that her visit, as well as the pause in the talks, were no mere coincidence.

DeMara who knew that Yeega had taken a quick liking to French culinary delights had ordered two café au laits from the room's replicator as they made themselves comfortable in the lounge area, sitting on lavishly upholstered chairs. The pleasant surprise showing on his face was proof that he was quite pleased with this latest cultural discovery.

"How have the conferences been so far?" she asked as he watched him sipping on the large cup.

He nodded. "Very interesting. We've had the pleasure to meet a great number of different people from various races, both from within the Federation and without. Before setting out on this journey, DeViscus had asked me to ensure to cultivate new relationships with as many worlds as possible," he said, referring to her father and member of the Tenarian ruling council. "Without wishing to sound boastful, I believe I have been rather successful in that respect."

DeMara smiled at that, happy to know that her people were making a more concerted effort to take part in the intergalactic community. It wasn't so much that Tenarians were isolationists per se, her people did welcome visitors to their world with open arms, and yet very few had ever endeavored to leave Tenaria for long periods of time. "I'm glad to hear it."

"But you feel that I could do more?"

She gave him a puzzled look.

"No need to be coy, DeMara," he said with a good-natured smile. "I may not fully understand humans and all their mannerisms but I am fully cognizant of Secretary Gwacham's frustration at our decision to abstain from her initiative. That's why you are here, is it not?"

There was of course little point in denying it. "Then perhaps you could make me understand your reasoning for this decision."

He lowered his cup and looked at her. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you would have difficulties appreciating the rationale considering how long you have spent away from Tenaria."

She frowned. "I thought you weren't holding this against me?"

Yeega quickly shook his head. "No, please, I did not mean to imply that at all. What I have said the other day still holds true. And we are all immensely proud of what you have accomplished. Your father and mother both wanted to make sure I conveyed that to you as clearly as I could."

Hearing that felt good. "Okay, then remind me why you believe what you're doing is for the best of our people? How can refusing to join an initiative designed to protect Tenaria and possibly the entire quadrant from unknown threats be the right choice?"

"I don't disagree with the notion of trying to protect oneself from a possible threat. But I am concerned about how these long-range sensor platforms could be used for other purposes."

"Such as?"

"Once the Federation has the ability to scan deep beyond its borders, it can use that information to make military decisions," he said.

"It's a defensive program," she insisted.

"It is intended as one, yes. But it might as well be used to, for example, plan an invasion of an alien world."

She looked at him blanked-eyed for a moment. Then she began to chuckle. The notion had seemed so ridiculous, it was funny to her. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh," she said quickly. "But I think your reservations might derive from the fact that you don't know the Federation very well. Take it from somebody like me who has served within Starfleet for the last twelve years. We don't plan invasions. Starfleet is primarily an exploratory and defensive organization. Probably more defensive over the last few years, but that was hardly by choice."

If Yeega had been offended by her sudden onset of bemusement he showed no signs of it. "I am aware of this, DeMara. I don't think any of us, including your parents, would have been very happy to see you join Starfleet if we thought of it otherwise."

"I must admit, I'm confused. Aren't you contradicting yourself?"

He stood to walk over to the tall French doors that lead to a balcony and from where he had a clear view onto the Palais de la Concorde and the seat of the Federation government. "I have studied the Articles of the Federation and the Starfleet Charter and I agree

with most of what they contain. I consider them to be remarkable documents considering that they are the guiding principles of what is arguably the single largest power in both the Alpha and the Beta quadrants. I believe that the leaders you follow have the best intentions at heart and that they wish to govern by those principles," he said and then turned around. "But I also believe, as does the Ruling Council, that too much power is dangerous, no matter who wields it, no matter how good their intentions."

She shook her head. "You're over-thinking this, Yeega. You're equating a simple defensive program designed to safeguard the Federation and its allies to a philosophical question about the corruption of power. I can see your argument and understand your caution, but this is not the point on which to make it. Starfleet and the Federation may have been a power to be reckoned with, even though I disagree it should have ever been considered as a danger to the people of this galaxy, but even then, that was before the war and the horrible losses that we have taken. Our focus now has to be to protect what is left and to ensure something like this will never happen again. This defensive initiative is an important first step in that direction."

He offered her a somber nod. "You know that we have all been devastated by the news of the pain and suffering the Dominion has brought onto the Federation and beyond. And let me assure you that I am not on an idealistic quest to preach the dangers of Federation power and influence. You are saying that this is a philosophical question and that is absolutely correct. It is the reason why Tenaria is not likely to ever join the Federation."

That she didn't like hearing. After all, she had hoped that her people would one day become part of the intergalactic community that she had sworn her own allegiance to. And not just because it wasn't always easy to be a member of an organization dedicated to protecting a coalition of worlds her own wasn't part of. She truly thought that Tenaria as well as the Federation would only benefit from such a union. But that was a conversation best left for another day. She shook her head. "Nobody has officially petitioned Tenaria to become a Federation member as far as I know," she said, knowing full-well, however, that her friend Michael Owens had certainly put forth such proposals to both the Ruling Council and the Federation

government after his years spent as a Federation ambassador on Tenaria.

Yeega walked back to his chair and sat. "No, you are correct. I am simply trying to make you understand the philosophical differences that would prevent us from joining the Federation or entering any alliance that could lead to a military purpose."

DeMara suppressed uttering a sigh. "Fine, I suppose I understand the reasoning for not wishing to become a Federation member, even if I don't agree with them. But you studied the Federation, you said so yourself. The proposed sensor platforms this defense initiative is looking to deploy have been used in other regions of space for at least a hundred years. And never have they been used for anything other than defensive purposes."

"You might be right in saying so. It does not, however, preclude them to be used in other ways."

She was starting to become frustrated with this argument and fought hard to not let it show. "You said that you are devastated by the destruction wrought upon the Federation and the rest of the galaxy by this last war. Would you not wish to do whatever is in your power to help us – the galaxy – from having to go through something like this again? An early detection system proposed by this initiative would be a good way to do that."

"Perhaps," he said as he reached for his cup again. And then looked back at her. "But not at the cost of our own values, DeMara. On those, we simply cannot and will not compromise."

"Even if it could stop another war?" she said perhaps more sharply than she had wanted to.

"A hypothetical war?" he said, as he sipped his coffee, the timbre of his voice refusing to match hers.

DeMara jumped out of her chair, unable to remain sitting quietly. "Your entire argument is based on hypotheticals. The possibility that a defensive detection grid could be used for an offensive reason, the possibility that the Federation will suddenly ignore two hundred years of peaceful policy and turn into the second coming of the Klingon Empire during its darkest days of expansionism."

"I am sorry that this upsets you so much, DeMara, I really am. Perhaps I have underestimated how much the experiences of the last

few years have changed your perception of the universe. But you must understand that it is not the way I think of the galaxy, nor your parents or the people on Tenaria."

She simply stood there staring at him without being able to form any words in response to this. Only very slowly did the truth begin to sink in. And in a way, it frightened her more than anything else she had feared about meeting Yeega after so many years.

Then she nodded slowly. "I understand and I will explain your decision to Secretary Gwacham. She will no doubt be very disappointed."

Yeega stood. "I regret this. Please tell her that as well."

"I will."

"I also regret that this appears to have angered you."

She shook her head quickly, trying to dissuade him from believing that it had. "Don't. I am not angry with you, Yeega."

He took a step closer to her and reached for her wrists, holding them gently. "Remember what I have told you, DeMara. You will always be welcome back home. I know that your parents are very eager for you to visit at your earliest convenience."

"Thanks," she said. "And hopefully I will be able to make time soon but I cannot leave right now," she added, knowing full well that if not an outright lie, it was most certainly merely a half-truth. "It was good to see you again."

They parted ways then and DeMara left the suite and headed back toward the transporter hub to return to *Eagle*.

As she stepped out of the hotel and back onto the streets of Paris, she allowed herself one last look up at Yeega's room.

She had been wrong all along. Her fears that her people would no longer recognize her or even accept her after all these years living within the Federation and serving Starfleet, and after being exposed and partaking in battle and violence particularly over the years fighting the Dominion had all been entirely unfounded.

The truth was much worse.

It wasn't that her people didn't recognize her anymore but that she could no longer recognize them.

# Legacy

May 2376

It had only been just over five months since the most devastating attack on Earth since the Xindi Incident of 2153. And even though the Breen assault on Starfleet Headquarters and the San Francisco Bay Area was not even close to comparable to the massive casualties the Xindi had caused two centuries earlier, Earth had become so unaccustomed to being a target of interstellar war, the shockwaves the assault had caused could still be felt even after all the physical scars had healed.

Michael Owens could find none of the heartbreaking damage he had seen in news footage immediately after the attack as he walked the streets of the city.

The Starfleet complex on both sides of the bay looked as immaculate as always with its perfectly maintained and manicured gardens and even the historic Golden Gate bridge in-between, which had been torn apart in the attack, had been fully restored to its old glory.

As far as he understood it, the Federation Council and the United Earth government had made clean up and repair a major priority after the attack and Michael thought he understood why. More than causing damage and casualties, the attack had been intended to demoralize not just the population of Earth but citizens all across the Federation, and at first, the Dominion had certainly succeeded with that task.

Footage of one of the Federation's most significant cities burning had caused widespread despair as it brought the war that had theretofore been waged mostly outside core Federation worlds, right to its very heart. Suddenly a sense that this war could strike anywhere at any time had become a scary reality for billions of citizens and even worse, a painful defeat had become a real possibility, one that could no longer be ignored.

The Federation had therefore not hesitated to repair the damage as quickly as possible to demonstrate to both its own people, as well as to its allies and enemies that a heinous surprise attack would not damage its resolve to win the war.

Considering the ultimate outcome, perhaps the strategy had paid off.

And yet while the damage had been seen to months ago, a certain atmosphere of desperation still lingered, if not on Earth in general, then certainly in this Northern California metropolis where over two thousand lives had been lost in that tragic event.

A pilgrimage to both the Dominion War memorial at the Presidio as well as the monument erected at the center of Golden Gate Park in memory of those lost during the Breen attack on the city had been one of the first stops he had made after arriving on Earth.

Paying his respects to the dead had not been the only reason he had come to visit the City by the Bay. There had been several mandatory meetings with a whole range of important Starfleet admirals and other officials who were eager to debrief starship captains personally the first chance they had, now that this long and bloody war had come to an end.

One of those admirals was his father who had left him a personal message even before he had known that he was returning *Eagle* to Earth.

He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about seeing Jonathan Owens again. He hadn't seen him in nearly four years and before that, they had gone another few years without coming face-to-face for good reason. Michael's relationship with his father had never been particularly steady and had only gotten worse first after his mother had passed when he had still been a child and then when his brother Matthew had been killed ten years ago.

Their last meeting had been unsurprisingly turbulent with accusations being thrown around both ways and in the end, he had to admit that he hadn't helped matters much. There had, however, been light at the end of the tunnel and perhaps even the first small steps toward a path of reconciliation.

They hadn't traveled down that road very far yet, which explained why Michael had purposefully delayed this meeting until all others had concluded.

Once he had finally made his way to the forty-second floor of Starfleet Headquarters where his father's enigmatic Department of Special Affairs and Investigations had its home, he was told that he was already expected. But instead of being shown to an office, he was given a set of coordinates and pointed to the nearest transporter room.

He materialized outdoors, in a place that was most certainly not Northern California. The first clue that he had traveled a significant distance was the fact that it had suddenly become night, even though it had been the early morning in San Francisco.

He found himself at the bottom of what looked like a massive crater. Upon closer inspection, though he found that the cavity was clearly man-made, considering the many smooth and step-like layers leading all the way to the surface that he guessed had to be at least six hundred meters up.

The stars in the clear sky gave further proof that he had been transported to the other side of the globe.

He stood near a large blast door that opened for him and the positively frosty air was more than enough motivation to quickly duck inside where he found his father emerging from a turbolift.

"Michael, sorry I only just heard that you had arrived."

"Where the hell are we, dad?"

He pointed through the still-open door. "Can't you tell? This used to be one of the world's largest diamond mines. Welcome to Udachnaya in the Sakha Republic."

"Russia?" he said. "What's wrong with Starfleet Headquarters?"

He shook his head as he led him into the turbolift. "Too many prying eyes out there. Sometimes it is better to be outside the spotlight and this place qualifies."

"No kidding. Might as well be on another planet."

The turbolift closed and after Owens Senior had activated the control panel it set into motion, taking them even deeper into the Earth. "Well, that's just a very snobbish attitude, son and I'm not sure the locals would approve. This planet is more than its large, glitzy cities."

"Sure, says the man who has chosen this place for his hidden base. I'm fairly certain you're not about to advertise Far Eastern Russia to Earth's tourism board."

"Far Eastern Russia perhaps," said the older Owens. "I just might leave out this mine."

They didn't appear to travel very far and the turbolift ride came to an end only shortly after it had set in motion, the doors opening to reveal an indistinct corridor that was similar in design to what Michael was used to on *Eagle* and was fairly standard within Starfleet facilities.

His father led him out of the lift and down the corridor. On the way to their destination, they came across at least a dozen other people who seemed to work in this facility, most of whom were Starfleet officers, and judging by the color of their uniforms, they were predominantly science personnel. The civilians he spotted also appeared to be scientists; he noticed at least a couple of lab coats.

This by itself was hardly suspicious, of course, had it not been for the last time he had visited a secret science outpost during the Dominion War. That experience ranked as one of the most painful of his life, and it was difficult not to think of the people he had lost there.

His father stepped up to a set of doors that swished open for him and then pointed at the entrance.

Just before Michael was about to step inside, he thought he saw a familiar face from the corner of his eye. He turned just in time to see the dark-haired woman wearing a red and black Starfleet uniform turn a corner. "Maya?"

But she hadn't stopped and she didn't remerge after he had called her name.

Jon Owens shot him a puzzled look, still waiting for him to step into his office.

"I thought I just saw somebody I know," he said and then shook his head, after realizing that Amaya Donners would have told him if she too was on Earth. Not to mention that her starship, the *Agamemnon* had not been in orbit when *Eagle* had arrived. "Never mind," he said and then walked into the office.

It was of decent size, befitting a man of his father's rank and position, and combined an office space complete with a large desk and chairs along with a briefing room, featuring a large oval table with six chairs surrounding it.

Otherwise, the office seemed sparsely decorated, a few plants, and only a handful of personal items. The most prominent feature was the large screen built into the far wall, opposite the desk, which judging by the crystal-clear image of the snow-covered mountain ranges dominating this region, might as well be mistaken for an actual window if not for the fact that they were far underground.

Jon noticed him looking that way. "I tend to get a bit claustrophobic," he said with a smirk and then pointed to a sofa along the adjacent wall for him to sit.

He did as suggested and then watched his father sit down behind his desk.

This was the first time Michael actually took a moment to consider the elder Owens. It had struck him the last time he had seen him on *Eagle* how old and exhausted he had appeared. Like a man who was no longer coping well with the stressed life, he was trying to lead and certainly nothing like the vital and energized man he had been when Michael had been much younger. Sadly, he didn't look any better

now and his good humor notwithstanding, he looked terribly old. Much older than he had any right to look.

"It is so good to see you again, Michael. I've been following *Eagle's* missions quite closely over the last few years. You have no idea how relieved I am that you came out of that nasty war in one piece."

Michael wanted to counter that *Eagle* had not come out in one piece at all. People had lost their lives. But perhaps considering the high number of average casualties to the fleet, he had to consider himself lucky after all. He certainly didn't feel it. What he didn't doubt, however, was that his father had taken an interest in *Eagle*. He had suspected on more than one occasion that Jonathan Owens might have had a hand in trying to keep him and his ship away from the frontlines, certainly not something to put past the man, considering that he strongly suspected that his father had somehow orchestrated him getting *Eagle* in the first place. Something that still angered him a great deal.

Michael was determined not to get into another fight with his father, so he simply nodded. "It's good to see you as well, dad."

For a moment his father didn't respond and instead silence settled over the two men as if to pretend that years of anger and resentment had never existed.

"It's been far too long and I'm looking forward to catch up."

Michael wanted to laugh but suppressed the urge. Catching up wasn't really something they did. "Sure. I suppose it's not the reason you brought me to your secret base in the middle of nowhere."

"I wouldn't call it secret."

Michael considered him suspiciously. "Starfleet knows about all this?"

"They know enough."

He couldn't quite suppress a sigh.

His father sat up straighter in his chair, resting his elbows on his desk. "Big things are happening, Michael. Really big things. And we need to be prepared for them. If we are not, what we just went through with the Dominion might feel like a schoolyard tussle in comparison."

"Geez, dad, why not ease me into things here?"

"I'm afraid we don't have much time. I'm going to need your help. Desperately."

"Okay, so how about you start with the beginning? What is it you're doing here and what is this big thing that's got you so rattled?"

But the admiral shook his head. "Before I can get into any of those details, I first need to be sure that you will take this on. That you will help me."

Michael stood up in frustration. "I hate this cloak and dagger nonsense, you know that. Just tell me straight, what is it you need my help with?"

Jonathan stood as well. "I need somebody I trust on my team. Somebody I know can take over the work that I started and can see things through."

"What?"

"I need you to come and join me," he said and then removed a padd from a drawer in his desk. "All the paperwork is already prepared. It comes with a promotion as well. All you need to do is say yes."

"I don't even know what I'm saying yes to," he said. "Besides, I have no intention of leaving *Eagle* to work with you in some secret underground lair here on Earth."

Jonathan sighed heavily. "Please son, this is not the time to be difficult about these things, trust me on that. I can't tell you more about my work until you agree to this. Until you have proper clearance. All I can say for now is that it is imperative that you do. What we are trying to accomplish here is crucial for the Federation's long-term safety and security. Maybe more so than what we've just gone through with the Dominion. You will see that once you join me here."

He looked back at his father with a blank expression, trying hard to avoid showing the anger he felt. He wasn't sure why he should have been surprised that his father would pull something like this, after all these years, he should have known better. He shook his head. "Do you have any idea how crazy this sounds? What kind of impossible position you're putting me in? We have barely spoken more than a handful of sentences in years, you have never once told me anything meaningful about what it is you do, and now, out of the blue, you want me to sign on to something without telling me the first thing about it and leave behind everything that *I* worked for all my life." He made sure to put extra emphasis on the fact that it was his work that had gotten him into the captain's chair of *Eagle*, not whatever it was his father might have done behind the scenes. Even if he wasn't so certain if that was actually true. "And you want me to be what? Your successor? These aren't the Middle Ages, dad. You can't just appoint your own heir. What about Starfleet Command?"

He dismissed this with a shake of his head. "Don't worry about Command. That's been taken care of."

Michael turned his back to his father, staring instead toward the high-resolution image of the mountain range. He realized then that it was likely a live external feed. His father hadn't just put this up for the esthetics. He wanted to know if anybody approached his base uninvited. "This just isn't right," he said still not looking at him. "And to be honest I don't think I want any part of this. Not unless you tell me something. Give me any indication of what all this is about. I can't see how you can expect me to make a sensible decision otherwise."

"I told you, it's—"

"Classified, I know," he completed his sentence. "So it's a chicken and egg situation then, is that it? You can't tell me anything because I don't have the clearance but I cannot get clearance until I sign on and commit myself to something I don't know anything about."

Owens Senior handed him the padd. "You'll have to trust me on that."

Michael glanced over the content of the padd briefly but as expected nothing on it seemed to reveal anything of any substance. Instead, it felt more like a ready-made contract to sell his soul.

There was only one word that he could spot that seemed to even hint at anything substantial. "Operation Myriad?" he read and then looked up.

"Son, listen—"

But he was interrupted by the door annunciator. He shot a glower toward the doors, clearly annoyed by the interruption, and then quickly took the padd out of Michael's hand to return it to his desk drawer.  
"Enter."

"I'm sorry if this isn't a good time," the man wearing a Starfleet command uniform said as he poked his head inside once the doors had parted.

Jon Owens' mood quickly improved after realizing who had interrupted the meeting with his son and he waved the man inside.  
"That's quite alright, come in."

Michael immediately recognized the tall, dark-skinned officer, even though he hadn't seen him in a long time. "Jarik?"

The officer offered a wide smile which to some may have been disconcerting considering his tapered ears that were a clear indication of his Vulcan origins. It didn't surprise Michael, however, knowing full

well that Jarik was only half-Vulcan and had long since embraced both aspects of his heritage, and quite successfully so.

The two men had known each other since their Academy days, having been roommates for two years during which Michael had learned that Jarik possessed both a splendidly rational mind but at times was perfectly able to display humor and other emotions as well.

"Michael," he said, still grinning. "I was told you were here."

He approached and they hugged briefly.

"Really good seeing you again. It has been far too long," the half-Vulcan said.

"Occupational hazard, I supposed," said Michael. "But you're right. How have you been? You working with my father now?"

Jarik nodded. "The reward for all my sins, I suppose."

Michael noticed his old friend was wearing four pips like him but his were arranged on top of a solid bar, a rank insignia not used very often off-planet and one that usually indicated a high, administrative rank. It didn't come as much of a surprise since differently to him, Jarik had never shown the same inclinations of becoming an explorer or a starship officer as he had. Instead, he had decided to serve Starfleet and the Federation by staying behind and becoming a member of the equally important administrative branch of the fleet.

"Jarik has been invaluable to me over the years," Jon Owens said, regarding the other man. "We wouldn't even be close to what we have achieved without him as part of the team."

"Whatever that might be," said Michael.

Jarik shot the admiral a mock frown. "I see he's keeping you in the dark."

"That's putting it mildly."

"It won't be like that for much longer. Not once you agree to help us."

"Can you give it a rest, dad?" Michael said.

"You know your father, he is nothing if not persistent," said Jarik with a wide grin, considering both men.

Michael was surprised that his father was okay with Jarik, his subordinate, speaking about him in such a manner and in front of his own son no less. But clearly, the two men had a very good working relationship, clearly, a better one than he shared with his father privately. He wasn't sure if this offended him or if it made him feel oddly jealous.

"Listen, Michael, Jon," said Jarik. "I have some business to take care of at headquarters tomorrow. Why don't the two of us get together for lunch? We can catch up and talk a little bit more about your father's offer."

Michael actually liked the sound of that. Not so much talking about his father, after all, his plans for him had been made unmistakably clear, but it had been far too long that he had tried to reconnect with the people of his past after spending years out in deep space.

"A splendid notion," Jon said before Michael could respond and then looked at him. "Take some time to digest what I've said. Consider what it will do to your career in Starfleet and then talk to Jarik. I'm confident he will be able to alleviate any doubts you might have."

"Might have?" Michael said with a little humorless laugh. "So far you haven't told me anything at all that would make me want to even consider this strange gig of yours."

Jarik clasped him on the shoulder. "We'll talk soon, Michael, and we'll see how you feel about it all then, alright?"

He found himself nodding. "Alright."

"Excellent. Now if you'd both excuse me, it's a short trip back to California these days but I have still much work to prepare," he said and looked back at his old friend, giving him a parting smile, which Michael reciprocated with one of his own.

Once he had left, Jon turned back to his son. "Jarik is a good man. You'll be working quite closely with him once you agree to join us."

Michael suppressed a sigh and then changed his mind about the retort he was ready to fire off. "If he's still the same man when he was when we were young then I don't doubt that for a second. And you clearly trust him quite a bit. Which begs the question: Why do you need me?"

His father didn't respond straight away. Instead, he walked back to his desk.

"Dad?"

He sat down. "I shouldn't be telling you this."

Michael uttered a laugh. "So far you've been telling me next to nothing."

"Jarik is suffering from a hereditary medical condition. I respect him too much to go into the details with you, but it's serious and there is no cure. He's been doing an admirable job covering up the symptoms but if you work with him on daily basis, it's hard to hide them

completely. Jarik has been invaluable but I need somebody I can rely on fully.”

“That’s pretty cold.”

“Please, you’re a starship captain, son. You have hundreds of people under your command, so you know how these things go. You’re only as strong as your weakest link. With what we are facing, we cannot afford to be sentimental.”

Hearing his father talk like that made him feel uncomfortable and yet he knew that there was truth to this.

Jon Owens stood from his chair again to round his desk and approach his son. “Michael, we are family. And sure, I know it may not be fashionable or politically correct to say this, but if we cannot rely on each other in moments of great need, who can we rely on?”

He shot his father a surprised look. And not just because those words sounded pretty hypocritical coming from the man who had spent a lifetime favoring his work over his family, Michael vividly recalled saying something very similar to DeMara Deen very recently. Family sticks together, he had told her, not expecting those words to come back to haunt him.

“I need to think about all this,” he said and turned toward the exit.

“Michael.”

He stopped short of the doors and turned back.

“Regardless of how you feel about me and what I do—“

He shook his head. “Dad, I don’t even know what it is you do.”

“Fair enough. But regardless of all that, it is truly good to see you again. There were times during the war...”

He left the rest unspoken.

But Michael nodded, understanding exactly what he was saying.  
“Yes, I know.”

“You’re one of the lucky ones, son.”

“Yeah.” He wanted to dwell on those thoughts even less than on his father’s surreptitious offer. “Things are going to get better,” he said, not quite certain himself if he even believed that.

But Jon Owens was quick to nod. “Yes, they will. But not unless we stay vigilant, son. Not unless we take action. And soon. You and me, together.”

He considered his father for a moment and it seemed obvious he was not talking in general terms. He really believed that what he was doing was essential in keeping the Federation safe. As to keeping it safe from what exactly, he couldn’t even guess.

"It was good seeing you too, dad."

He nodded. "I'll have somebody take you back up to the surface. You can beam out from there."

"Thanks," he said and turned and left the office.

\* \* \*

Michael had spent most of the next day at his family home near Waukesha, Wisconsin, only to find the large antebellum-style house mostly abandoned. It was obvious that his father hadn't spent any significant time there in a long while. He had always suspected that he had avoided their home ever since his mother had died, perhaps because the reminder was too painful.

He had ventured into his father's study on the second floor and there on his large oak desk he found a holo-picture of the Owens family all together, his mother and father as well as he and his brother, both nothing more than kids but all smiling happily as their hair rustled under the light breeze of that day. The image looked perfectly life-like of course, thanks to holo-technology. It was a captured moment in time that seemed eternal, without any of those smiles wavering for even a moment.

He couldn't remember having taken that picture or if those smiles had been genuine. If this was a mere pretension of the Owens household, that everything was, in fact, as perfect as the image suggested.

What he did remember vividly was that his mother had died in a workplace accident less than a year or so after. He remembered that his brother, Matthew, had abandoned the family as soon as he had been able to, unable to cope with his father's never-ending demands, particularly his insistence that he followed in his footsteps and joined Starfleet.

He recalled that he himself had once hoped to become an oceanographer or perhaps a marine biologist just like his mother but that with her gone, and his older brother determined not to have anything to do with his father, his fate was practically sealed.

Once Matthew had left and was no longer within his father's realm of influence, he had brooked no debate as to where Michael's future would lie.

It had been his father's will that he'd joined Starfleet. It hadn't been his choice at all. Jonathan Owens had wanted one thing out of his sons. An heir. Somebody to carry on his legacy.

With those emotions still stirring up inside of him, he left the family home and returned to San Francisco.

Michael had chosen to meet Jarik at the 602 Club in Mill Valley, just north of San Francisco and Starfleet Headquarters.

By the time Michael had been in his second year at the Academy, he had left behind his trepidations of joining Starfleet on his father's wishes and he had developed his own ambitions of becoming a pilot and a starship officer. As such the 602 Club had been one of his favorite hang-outs, as he and many other aspiring officers sipped on their synthohols while they exchanged Academy tales and marveled at the pictures of the great explorers that had come before them decorating the walls. Like many others before him and likely long after, Michael too had idolized the likes of Jonathan Archer, James Kirk, and Grace McAfee, dreaming of following in their footsteps one day. Even Jarik who had never really shown much of an interest in becoming an explorer had been attracted to the lore of this place back in the day.

With the Academy semester having concluded, it wasn't quite as loud and rowdy of a place as he remembered it from his school years, which suited him just fine. He found his former roommate sitting in one of the more remote booths when he came in and quickly joined him.

"Michael, glad you could make it," he said with a large grin.

"Of course." Michael took a seat across from him and ordered a synthoholic dark ale he hadn't tasted since the last time he had visited this establishment as a cadet. "Nothing like a trip down memory lane with a good friend. How have you been, Jarik?"

"Cannot complain. Then, of course, my exploits have hardly been comparable to what you have been up to, saving the galaxy as we know it out there on the final frontier." The gleam in his eye gave proof that his mockery was good-natured humor.

Michael regarded him for a brief moment but could notice no signs of the serious affliction his father had mentioned. He was either very good at hiding it or his father had invented the entire thing to convince him to take him up on his offer. He wanted to believe that he wouldn't stoop so low, but in truth, he didn't fully put it past him either. "I'm sure Starfleet would fall apart without the bureaucrats."

"Flattery will not get you anywhere, Michael," he said as they received their drink orders. "Besides, I know what starship officers say about us bureaucrats when we are not around to hear it."

Michael laughed as he sipped his ale, the familiar taste and texture quickly bringing back memories. He let his eyes wander across the club. "Those were the days, weren't they? Everything seemed possible back then. Everything was within reach. Optimism and excitement everywhere you looked."

He nodded. "The galaxy was wide open to us. For some, it seems the promise held."

Michael looked back at his old friend. "If I remember right, you didn't quite hear the same call as I or Amaya did. You never had your head in the stars."

"True enough."

"Don't tell me you're regretting it now? It's not too late, you know."

He shook his head as he took a sip from his own beverage. "No regrets. I'm perfectly content where my life has taken me and the work I've been able to be a part of."

"Yes, the mysterious SAI. So, are we here so you can pick up where my father has left off? Is this the hard sell?"

Jarik uttered a laugh himself, causing a couple of heads to turn his way. Hearing a Vulcan laugh wasn't as unusual as it had once been, and yet it still drew attention now and then. "If I have learned one thing over the years, it's that Owens' are a stubborn bunch. Your father is determined to see you come work for him and you are equally determined to stay where you are. Unmovable object, meet your unstoppable force."

"I don't quite think it's that," said Michael. "Dad can make as many demands as the day is long but his reach goes only so far. I know he's a man who is used to getting what he wants. There aren't many people who can say no to him. Hell, I was once one of the people who fell in line every time he barked. It's the reason I wear the uniform today. But I'm not a child anymore and I make my own decisions and I'll be damned if I let him continue to meddle with them."

Jarik raised his hands defensively. "Hey, I'm not getting into the middle of this family dispute," he said and then looked him straight in the eye. "But let me ask you something else. Is this what you really want or is this just a way for you to spite your father?"

Michael's instinctive response was that this had nothing to do with his father at all. That he was happy with where he was in his life

and his career. That commanding *Eagle* was everything he had ever wanted, and that he was not willing to give it up for anything. But he also realized that this wasn't the complete truth.

"So, tell me what you think, I should do then? Is this work you and my father are doing so important? Am I being selfish by hanging on to what it is I want instead of considering the wider implications and the greater good? Or should I commit myself to something I don't even know the first thing about?"

Jark took another sip and then looked around the bar some more, his eyes seemingly taking in the portraits of the great Starfleet explorers of the past. Men and women who had left behind legacies that had inspired generations of eager young cadets. "What is it you want to be remembered for, Michael?"

The questions caught him off-guard. "To be honest, that's not something I tend to worry about. I want to make a difference in the here and now. And I think I'm doing that on *Eagle*. What happens after I'm gone, that's not something that keeps me up at night."

He nodded and looked back his way. "Fair enough. If you ask me, you should do what makes you happy. If that's commanding a starship, if that is your calling, and all evidence seems to point to that fact, then that's where you belong."

Michael shot him a puzzled look. "Don't think my father would be very happy with you giving me that kind of advice."

A playful smile danced on his lips. "If you don't tell him, neither will I."

And yet, with his father's foreboding tone still edged in his memory, Michael couldn't entirely deny his curiosity. "This Operation Myriad," he said. "Is there anything at all you can tell me about it? Why it has my father so concerned?"

Jarik couldn't entirely hide his surprise at hearing that name.  
"What has he told you?"

Michael frowned.

"Dumb question. Nothing, of course. Listen, I would be lying if I didn't say that it wasn't important, the work we are doing. But I would betray your father's trust if I were to reveal classified details, even to his own son, especially since you are not inclined to join us. I'd rather not be in that position."

He nodded understandingly. "I think that's fair enough."

They sat in silence for a moment, nursing their respective drinks. Michael looked back up at him. "So how is he? My father?"

If Jarik was surprised by this sudden display of concern, he didn't show it. "He's fine. I mean, you probably know this better than most, but he has always been a driven individual, and the work we do, it takes a toll on him, there is no doubt. But Jonathan Owens is nothing if not persistent. He is determined to see things through and he will find a way, with or without you at his side."

Michael nodded gingerly. It felt odd hearing another man speak of his father like this and it made him realize that despite what Jarik thought, perhaps he really did know the man much better than he ever had. Jonathan Owens had been, after all, an absentee father for most of his childhood and he mostly remained a mystery to him even now.

He was tempted to ask him about his own condition, about this supposed affliction his father had mentioned. But it felt inappropriate to bring it up, either his father had told him this in confidence or it was an outright untruth.

"He'll be fine, Michael."

It was oddly comforting hearing Jarik say this. He raised his glass. "I wish you and him the best of luck then. With whatever it is you're doing to save us all from our undoing."

Jarik smirked as he raised his own. "Here's to avoiding our own undoing."

\* \* \*

The small white boat rocked gently on the calm azure and turquoise sea underneath an equally blue and mostly cloudless sky and a pleasantly warm sun.

Michael stood near the bow, surveying his surroundings and taking a deep breath of sea air, once again realizing how much he had missed it, and that no matter how advanced technology had become, no matter how realistic of a depiction a holodeck could create, it would never quite be a substitute for the real thing.

"Now that we're on a sea-going vessel, I suppose you'd still want me to address you as captain."

Michael turned to see Tazla Star having emerged from the deckhouse, wearing a short-sleeved, black and white wetsuit similar to the one he wore himself. He had to admit, however, that the tall,

redheaded Trill woman made the skintight outfit look a great deal better on her.

He offered her a smile. "First, let's get our terminology right. This is a trawler, a converted fishing boat if you will, and as such, I think skipper would be more appropriate."

She gave him a quick, mock salute. "Aye, aye, skipper."

He could tell she was enjoying herself and he was glad that he had decided to invite her along to his shore leave. It had actually been DeMara's idea who had unexpectedly turned down his offer to spend shore leave with him and had instead suggested he invited Star instead, arguing that the captain and first officer should be spending more time with each other away from the ship. It had been a sensible recommendation, even if it hadn't been his first choice, and yet he suspected that Dee's suggestion had more to do with her decision to not spend time with him rather than strengthening his bond with his XO.

The reason he had been hesitant to take Star along was mostly due to the fact that their relationship had been off to a rocky start when she had come aboard nearly two years earlier and after she had revealed that her assignment on *Eagle* had been not much more than a smokescreen in order to carry out a clandestine mission for Starfleet Intelligence.

Her position had been made permanent after that incident, ostensibly as a punishment for her disobeying orders and working against the interests of her then-boss and his morally questionable aspirations.

Michael had understandably not trusted his first officer after this for a long time, even after she had proven her dedication to her new position over and over again and some, like Deen, had questioned his commitment to having her around at all. It soon became clear that his approach of micromanaging the ship and crew was becoming frustrating to everyone, most of all Star herself.

Eventually, things had improved between them and trust had followed. He had started to see the Trill as not only indispensable but also as an exemplary Starfleet officer, a notion that most people who knew of Tazla Star for her past crimes would have considered ludicrous.

"I have to say, this is truly beautiful," she said as her eyes roamed over the shimmering blue sea and the small chain of green islands. "I think I might be warming to the idea of a blue ocean."

Michael's smile widened. "Oh, you haven't seen anything yet. The real beauty of the Great Barrier lies below us." He referred to an old-

fashioned and colorful paper map that he had spread out on an equipment box. "We'll be spending the next few hours exploring Osprey Reef and its amazing coral mesa. It's home to all kinds of marine life; cuttlefish, wrasses, eagle rays, sea turtles, and if we're lucky a few dwarf whales and a reef shark or two."

His smile was infectious. "I had no idea you were so passionate about the ocean."

He nodded as he looked up at the sea surrounding them. "Always have been. My mother's influence."

"Well, I can't wait and start exploring, never thought I do that underwater but I suppose there's a first thing for everything."

"With all those accumulated lifetimes I find it hard to believe that you've never gone diving before," he said as he considered the Trill for a moment, glancing briefly toward her abdomen where he knew her long-lived symbiont resided.

"Wexri, Star's second host, was quite an avid swimmer when she was young and before she joined with Star"

He nodded. "Was she the politician?"

Star smirked. "Yeah. A champion of equal rights and social justice. She dedicated her life to those pursuits, even more so after the joining. Spend very little time on personal pursuits as she became older. Wexri practically lived for her calling."

"She sounds like she was an admirable woman but let's try not to emulate all aspects of her life," said Michael and grabbed the two rigs of lightweight oxygen tanks which would allow them to remain submerged for hours, and handed one to her. "Today is all about leaving duties and obligation above the surface. Skipper's orders."

She smirked as she took the rig and began to strap it on, following Michael's example. "Wouldn't dream of defying that one."

He stepped up to her and double-checked her rig. "You're good to go," he said and patted her on the shoulder. "Trust me, after this, you'll start wishing for more color in outer space."

A most unwelcome sound from the deckhouse interrupted their preparations. It was coming from his communicator.

"Didn't you give orders not to be disturbed?" said Star.

Michael nodded and frowned. "Can't be good."

He headed into the deckhouse and answered his communicator only to find that it was much worse than he could have imagined. After a brief moment he stepped back onto the deck and judging by the surprised look on Star's face, he must have appeared as pale as he felt.

"It's my father," he said, still trying to process the news he had just been told. "He's dead."

\* \* \*

Shore leave at the Great Barrier Reef was understandably cut short as the marvels of the Coral Sea had suddenly become the furthest thing from Michael Owens' thoughts.

Star had naturally been fully understanding and had been the first to offer him her heartfelt condolences, and he could tell that she truly meant it. She had also pretty much insisted to return the trawler to the seaport herself while he beamed back onto the ship. He had hesitated for a moment, considering her lack of experience with actual seafaring vessels, but she had convinced him that if she could pilot a three-million-ton starship, she'd be able to handle a comparatively tiny boat.

He had relented, mostly because he found it suddenly quite difficult to focus on even the most basic tasks. And even after returning to his quarters on *Eagle*, he still felt a sense of shock he hadn't experienced since Jana Tren, the woman he had loved, had been killed during the war.

He had, of course, not been as close to his father as he had been to Jana, not even as a child, and yet he couldn't deny that inexplicable feeling that had settled in his chest, like a massive weight threatening to crush him. Even after having lost far too many people, he had been close to over the years, his mother, his brother, Jana, Gene Edison, and many other crewmembers and sometimes friends, he realized that he had not gotten used to this at all. That it still hurt as if a part of himself had been violently ripped out of his body.

It had also left him slightly dizzy, unable to think what it was he should be doing first.

One of his first thoughts had been to find DeMara, his closest friend and confidant, and share the news with her. After all, she had known his father quite well and differently to him, had actually gotten along with him very well.

He ultimately decided against it. Not only was she busy on Earth, but the news would surely have hurt her a great deal as well, and Michael was already concerned about the way the death of a very close friend had affected her on their last mission.

It was then that it suddenly struck him why the news felt so devastating. With both his mother and brother already gone, he had now lost everyone in his immediate family. The Owens clan went beyond this, of course, he had cousins, nephews, and aunts, but many of whom he had never been particularly close to.

He felt alone all of a sudden, which seemed odd to him considering how rarely he had spoken to his father over the years. And then, very slowly, an even worse feeling began to spread inside of him. Regret.

It took him a surprisingly long time to process all those emotions raging in his mind. In the past, when he had lost people, it had usually been in combat or during some other pressing situation that had not allowed him time to think or grieve immediately, there had usually been a crisis surrounding the death of a friend or colleague which had forced him to divert all his attention to trying to resolve it and ensure that nobody else shared that same fate.

For the first time in as long as he could remember, Michael found himself wishing for just such a crisis. Anything really to take his mind off the death of his father.

It was Tazla Star who managed to ultimately get him out of this miserable state he had fallen into. She came to see him a few hours after he had left her in Australia to check up on him and to let him know that she had managed to return the trawler semi-successfully.

Apparently, sensing his despair, she had attempted to lift his mood by recounting her experience of attempting to pilot the boat, including the three near-collisions as she had tried to navigate around much larger ships in the port that had very nearly resulted in her being taken into custody by the authorities and more than a few choice words by the captains of the other vessels.

Michael did find himself laughing out loud at her horrible attempts of mimicking an Australian accent and repeating some of the sailors' words they had used to describe her nautical skills.

"Turns out steering a boat on an ocean isn't quite the same thing as piloting a starship," she had said. "Unless maybe you count trying to navigate through a class-four ion storm."

She had asked him if there was anything else she could do for him before she had left, but as it had turned out, she had already done enough and he thanked her for it.

After taking a sonic shower and dressing in his uniform again, he headed straight to Starfleet Headquarters to meet with the medical team responsible for taking care of his father's body.

He had taken his time to look at his father's lifeless corpse, taking a very small amount of comfort from the fact that he looked so peaceful and at rest after having lived a life that had clearly taken its toll on him.

After having identified the body, he spoke to the medical examiner. He had already been told that his father had died from a heart attack but he needed more details, after all, at just eighty-nine years, Jonathan Owens had been too young to pass away from such a seemingly preventable death. But as it turned out, the medical examiner who had access to his father's medical records determined that Jonathan Owens had suffered from heart problems for a few years now, no doubt brought on by the stressful nature of his occupation. And he had repeatedly refused to seek the treatment his doctors had highly recommended.

"He was one of the most stubborn men I've ever known," said Jarik who had met Michael in a small coffee shop on Market Street in the late afternoon. "And he was so damned secretive about his health. It was just never a topic he would talk about. Even to me."

Michael nodded, seeing how evasive he had been about his actual work, it came as little surprise that he would have been just as vague when it came to his wellbeing. "I've been told it runs in the family."

"I feel awful about this, truly. No two days ago you were asking me about him and I told you he was fine, that there was nothing to worry about. I didn't even realize how wrong I was. I am so sorry, Michael."

But he just shook his head. "You couldn't have known."

"Couldn't I? I've been working closely with him over the last three years. I practically talked to him every day. I should have seen it, Michael. I should have seen it and I should have insisted he'd seek help."

Michael sipped on his coffee. "We both know he wouldn't have listened to you. The man was too stubborn to listen to his doctors, what could you have done?"

"I could have threatened to quit, that's what. I could have told him that he needed to take care of himself or I would walk away."

He uttered a mirthless chuckle. "It would have accomplished nothing. He most likely would have called your bluff. And no doubt if you hadn't been there over the last few years, he would have worked himself even harder and died sooner."

Jarik didn't say anything to that.

"It wasn't your fault. Let's face it, if anyone is to blame here, it's him."

"Don't do that."

He looked up. "What? It's true. His own stubbornness killed him."

"He was a good man. Maybe he wasn't a good father but he was a good man."

"I guess you would have known better than me," said Owens, finished his coffee, and stood, he had a funeral to prepare for.

\* \* \*

There was no more a sobering place to fully realize the cost of the recent war than at the Starfleet Cemetery where the majority of those who had fallen in the conflict had been laid to rest.

Michael understood that not all of the sea of countless white headstones belonged to casualties of the most recent war, but they made up, without doubt, a significant proportion.

He watched on as his father's remains were being lowered into the ground to join the thousands of bodies interred in this place.

No matter how Michael had felt about his father when he had been alive, Starfleet had clearly thought very highly of him, judging by the large turnout at his funeral. The throng of white dress uniforms extended nearly as far as he could see, and he was fairly certain every last member of the admiralty was in attendance, certainly everyone within a few day's reach from Earth, and many of which seemed eager to share a few words with him, even those with whom he had clashed in a professional capacity over the years.

All past transgressions appeared to be water under the bridge, at least for this occasion, as many came up to him, offering their condolences and reminding him what a great man his father had been.

Michael accepted all this graciously, of course, but in the back of his mind, he was unable to stop wondering if perhaps the casket had been accidentally switched out somewhere and that he was attending the burial of an entirely different man by mistake.

Any such doubts were ultimately dispelled for once and for all when he and the rest of the mourners watched a tall and gracious-looking Andorian dressed in a long and beautiful black gown walk up a small makeshift stage just a few meters from where his father had been buried.

Michael thought he recognized her even before the music had begun and she had started to sing one of the most moving renditions of *La mamma morta* he had ever heard.

The tragic aria of a woman lamenting the killing of her mother who had died protecting her during the French Revolution had been his father's favorite musical composition and seemingly unsurprisingly he had managed to include in his will not only that it be performed at his funeral, he apparently also had the connections to ensure Pira Sh'zohlel, the Federation's most famous soprano, would be the one to sing it.

The performance was impeccable and Sh'zohlel easily channeled the legendary Maria Callas who had made that same piece immortal centuries earlier. Her rich and exotic bel canto technique added an otherworldliness to the aria unheard of before Earth had joined the intergalactic community.

It was only after the music had died down—the audience remaining in quiet appreciation instead of breaking out in inappropriate applause—and the Andorian had cleared the stage that it struck him how much like his father this performance had been, making sure that even in death, at least for a brief moment, he remained the center of the universe.

The speeches were next and he had dreaded those the most. Especially since the Commander-in-Chief had delivered a glowing testament to what he had called sixty years of selfless service to the Federation. The Chief of Staff, the Commander, Starfleet, and the Head of Fleet Operations had all struck a very similar tone. When it came to his turn to speak—he had not wished to deliver a speech, but the top brass had talked him into it—and he stood at the podium in front of at least a few hundred high-ranking Starfleet officers, he found himself at a loss for words.

It wasn't because he was unaccustomed speaking in front of crowds or at funerals. As a Starfleet captain, he had done both more times than he cared to remember, most recently only a few months ago on a planet very far from Earth. Granted, he usually didn't have to address nearly the entirety of Starfleet Command, but public speaking wasn't the issue.

He glanced at those faces in the crowd looking up at him expectedly and awaiting to hear from the one person they believed had known Jonathan Owens better than anyone, his own son. The truth was the exact opposite.

He spotted DeMara Deen in the audience as well, he had arrived with her from *Eagle* and her eyes were still red from the tears she had shed for a man she had greatly respected. After reading over his prepared remarks, she had also strongly suggested some changes to soften his language, all of which he had dismissed.

He looked down at the padd resting on the top of the podium, reading the first words without uttering them out loud. 'My father gave his life to Starfleet. The cost of which, unfortunately, was not just his health, but also his family.'

There was no doubt that this would not play well with this crowd and when he had written it, he had felt an old anger resurface, and had not cared what the rest of the galaxy might think of him for condemning the man who had been a father to him in name only.

He switched the padd off. "There is little else I can think of to say about my father after everything we have already heard. His accomplishment had a tremendous impact on Starfleet and the Federation. Jonathan Owens dedicated his life to Starfleet, and taught many of us, including me, what it means to serve and to believe in something far greater than any one of us."

More importantly, however, he was my father and while we had our difficulties over the years, even though we didn't see eye to eye on many issues, I can say one thing with absolute certainty. I will miss him. Not Jonathan Owens the admiral, but my dad. I wish we could have had more time to get to know each other again.

I wish ..." he stopped himself when he realized that he was threatening to lose control of his emotions while stumbling through the improvised speech. He hadn't even realized that he had felt that way. Regret, he realized, was a vicious emotion and one never truly understood until it was already far too late. Exploring it now, in front of hundreds wasn't the right time or place. "Thank you for a lifetime of tireless service to the Federation, Admiral.

You can rest now, Dad. We have it from here," he worked hard to suppress the tears which were threatening to escape his eyes as a terrible silence seemed to have gripped the entirety of this vast cemetery. He could have sworn even the birds had stopped chirping. Or perhaps, he had simply tuned out the world around him.

He left the podium quickly and without making eye contact with anyone until he was back in his chair and feeling DeMara's hand gently on his shoulder. He looked up at her and she was nodding slowly, wordlessly thanking him for his words.

"It was a terrible speech," he said later when they had moved on to the reception and he had found his voice again.

"I think it came from the heart, and I think people could tell."

He had to field another string of well-wishers and condolences at the reception, many coming from people Michael had never even seen before. Some faces however were familiar, such as his cousin Vincent Owens who had brought his wife Kerra, both of whom served in Starfleet as well, Vincent as a scientist, and Kerra in the Sol Defense Force. They had been accompanied by their son Rhory who Kerra had proudly announced had recently aced his entry tests to the Academy and who was on track to become a cadet later in the year.

Michael was hardly surprised, having found Rhory to be a very bright kid even at an early age, and even though he didn't speak much, his attentive eyes seemed to do little to hide a keen intellect. The young man was clearly meant for big things, perhaps even following his own footsteps and becoming a starship captain one day.

Michael was much more surprised to see another face at the funeral, one with which he was even more familiar with and for entirely different reasons.

"My condolences, Michael. I'm really sorry for your loss." The tall, dark-skinned woman wearing captain's pips on her all-white dress uniform jacket hugged him briefly before he had even been able to register her approach.

"I didn't even know you were on Earth," said Michael once they had let go and he was able to take in Amaya Donners fully.

She nodded. "Yes. Sorry I didn't tell you. It was really just meant to be a short layover. *Agamemnon* was due to depart two days ago but ... well, I couldn't miss the funeral."

It took him a moment to process this. The two of them had been friends since their Academy days, had even served briefly on the same ship, and only recently had become more than friends even though they had both avoided trying to define their relationship exactly. It was difficult enough maintaining a friendship as starship captains with literally half a galaxy between them most of the time, harder still during a war.

"I wish we had time to catch up but *Agamemnon* is making preparations to depart even as we speak," she said and sounded genuinely apologetic for this missed opportunity to spend time together.

"Of course, I understand. Thank you for making it to the funeral." But then he remembered that he had thought that he had seen her before the funeral. At his father's base in Russia just a few days earlier.

She hugged him again before he could bring it up. "I'm truly sorry, Michael, I'm still in shock myself. We lost a great man but more importantly, you lost your father. I promise I will make time to talk to you soon," she said and then disappeared again within the crowd of white uniforms surrounding them.

Michael didn't see her again that day and remained too busy trying to find her with the many other mourners seeking to have a moment with the son of the late, great Jonathan Owens.

\* \* \*

Once back on *Eagle*, after a long and exhausting day, one of Michael's first stops was the bridge where he found a skeleton staff of only three officers standing watch while most of the crew was on shore leave.

Ensign Rachel Milestone was the most ranking officer, casually chatting with a female Vulcan ensign whose name escape Michael in that particular moment. He tried to not let that annoy him too much, even though he had prided himself on knowing the name and face of every officer under his command, a challenging task considering the frequency of crew rotations on a ship of *Eagle*'s size. Considering the day he'd had; he forgave himself for his lapse.

The petite ensign was sitting in the XO's chair, even though she was the duty officer and as such was within her rights to occupy the center seat while she was in command. The young woman had a large smirk on her face, clearly amused with the conversation she was having even if the humor appeared to be entirely lost on the Vulcan, judging by her stone-faced expression.

Milestone's smile quickly dropped off her face when she spotted the captain approach and she stood from the chair and snapped to attention a little bit too quickly Michael thought.

"Captain."

He waved her off. "At ease, Ensign."

She visibly relaxed.

The Vulcan woman who had been standing with her hands clasped behind her back offered him a short nod.

"I was hoping you could look into something for me," he said, addressing Milestone. "I'm looking for the *Agamemnon*."

"Yes, sir," she said and then promptly headed toward the operations console at the front of the bridge, taking the empty chair while Michael followed her.

"Checking sensors now, sir," she said as she worked the station. She started to shake her head within seconds. "She's not in the system, sir."

"Can you check sensor records?"

She gave him an efficient nod and turned back to the console. "Got her. She was moored at Starbase One until four hours ago." Anticipating his next order, she went back to look at the current sensor feed. "I have her on long-range. She is traveling at warp eight on a heading of two-three-one mark five-two."

Michael considered that for a moment. "Can you tell when she arrived in the system?"

Her fingers danced over the console. "According to the starbase's arrival log, she got here four days ago, sir. One day before us."

He wasn't sure why it bothered him so much that Amaya Donners had never tried to make contact during the time they had been both in the same place. Starfleet captains, he understood, were busy people, knew it first-hand of course, but it felt odd to him that she hadn't even attempted to get in touch until the funeral, especially since they had only recently worked together on a particularly challenging mission that had not ended in a way either of them had hoped for.

"Is there anything else you would like me to check for you, sir?"

Michael looked down and saw Milestone glancing up at him and realizing that he had been in thoughts for a few seconds. He shook his head. "No, thank you, Ensign, that'll be all." He stepped away from operations but stopped again when he heard her speak again.

"Sir?"

He turned to look at her.

She had left her chair. "I just wanted to say how sorry I am for your loss."

He gave her a short nod to acknowledge the sentiment and then headed for the turbolift and back to his quarters.

Amaya had left him a message as it turned out but it was text-only and didn't elaborate any further on the few words she had said to him at the funeral, merely offering her condolences once more and apologizing for the missed opportunity.

A short while later DeMara Deen came to visit, correctly anticipating that he didn't feel like being alone. They sat together and he talked to her about his father and the few happy memories he had of him, the majority of which had been while his mother had still been alive.

There was, however, one moment that stuck out to him, he told her. It was the day he had graduated from the Academy and he remembered vividly how proud his father had been of him. The cynical side of him had always attributed his father's pride as a merely selfish indulgence on his father's part. An indication that he was pleased with his efforts of ensuring his own legacy by having one of his sons follow in his footsteps.

Now on reflection, however, he could remember how happy it had made him to have his father's adoration in that brief moment.

"I don't think it was ever just about him, Michael. I know he could be intense and that he often put his work before everything else including you and his family. But I also know that he loved you dearly."

Michael nodded at those words and told her about their last meeting and his offer to join him and how he had turned him down.

"Are you still considering it?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Besides, Jarik told me at the funeral that he would be filling in as the interim director of SAI. It makes sense for him to continue my father's work, whatever it was. Better than someone who knew next to nothing about it."

"I suppose you're right."

"But I can't stop thinking about Amaya. She was there the day I met dad at his base, I'm sure of it now. And I also know she worked for him before. He was practically instrumental in getting her *Agamemnon*. I can't shake the feeling that they are up to something."

"They?"

He stood from the couch he had been sitting on and stared out of the sloped viewports into open space. "Amaya and maybe Jarik as well. It is not like her at all to not talk to me and now she's off to God knows where in a big hurry," he said and turned to glance back at her. "My father was worried about something. I mean really worried. I had never quite seen him like that before. Something is happening, Dee, and I have this terrible feeling that it will catch us all by surprise."

"What do you think it is? What was he working on?"

Michael shook his head. "I haven't got the slightest idea, but whatever it is, I think by turning him down when I did, I might have

inadvertently made matters worse. Whatever's coming, we won't be prepared for it."

The story continues in  
**Quantum Divergence**

## Until She's Gone

**May 2376**

"EJ-7 interlock."

The Bolian placed the requested tool into So'Dan Leva's outstretched hand and the tactical officer didn't even look at the device as he brought his hand back and into the open-access hatch he was buried in up to his waist. After applying the tool his hand remerged to allow Marjorie Alendra to take it off him again.

"Isolitic converter."

Once again the lieutenant went to the large toolbox she had brought with her into the narrow Jefferies tube she and So'Dan had climbed into, found what he had asked for, and placed it into his waiting palm. And once again So'Dan wordlessly applied the device.

"Interphasic coil spanner."

This time Alendra hesitated for just a brief moment before finding a large device in the toolbox and handing it over.

So'Dan brought it toward him but apparently not realizing that its size wouldn't allow it to fit inside the small hatch with him, he bumped it hard against the bulkhead which in turn caused him to flinch suddenly and hit his head.

"Son of a gun," he moaned and then crawled out of the hatch, only to find Alendra giggling at his misfortune. He looked down at the tool he had dropped. "Interphasic coil spanner, not compensator."

"Oh, sorry," she said and then looked back at the toolbox, rummaging through its content. "I don't think we brought the coil spanner."

"I'm going to need the coil spanner here."

She shrugged her shoulders. "If you need the coil spanner, you'll need the coil spanner," she said with a grin.

"I have an idea. Why don't you go down to engineering and get us the coil spanner?"

Alendra pointed right at him and then winked. "That's why you're the boss, boss. You come up with all the great ideas. I'll be back in a jiffy," she said and then tried to crawl past him in the narrow Jefferies tube but just as So'Dan was attempting to push himself to his left to allow her room to pass, she also moved to his left.

This ensuing back and forth dance achieved nothing but block them both from passing each other.

After their fourth attempt, So'Dan held up his hand. "Stop. Seeing that I'm the man with the ideas here, I suggest the following. I stay put right here, you pass me on my left."

She gave him a quick nod. "Another excellent suggestion," she said and then did as he had suggested. As it turned out, however, the crawlspace was still far too narrow to allow two people to pass comfortably side-by-side, particularly with Leva's larger frame. Alendra had to practically squeeze himself past him.

"I hope you don't object to some incidental contact," she said as she slowly made her way through.

"Not as long as you don't mind."

She stopped halfway; So'Dan practically pressed right against her. "I guess it would be silly to go back now, considering I'm already here."

"Couldn't agree more. Let's see this through."

She nodded. "Truth be told, I've been in much worse positions," Alendra said before she continued.

"Not even top five," So'Dan agreed.

Alendra uttered a little laugh and finally managed to fully dislodge herself and emerge on the other side. She dramatically straightened her uniform jacket which had been ruffled by the tight squeeze. "Wouldn't want people to get the wrong idea."

"Definitely not."

"I'll be back before you know it."

"Can't wait."

And with that, she crawled off.

He considered Alendra for a moment as he watched her make her way down the Jefferies tube on all fours. The bald, blue-skinned Bolian with the very human given name had been about the only good thing to come out of his short stint as a first officer on the *Sacajawea* a few months earlier.

It hadn't been easy for him to decide to leave *Eagle* after having served on her for nearly five years, in fact, it had very much felt like leaving home. But with the war-ravaged fleet in desperate need of experienced officers he had ultimately chosen to try and advance his career instead of sticking to what he knew and with what he had been most comfortable with on *Eagle* where the chances of climbing ranks were much less likely.

Of course, had he known what was to be in store for him as the first officer on the ill-fated *Sacajawea*, perhaps he would have thought twice about taking on that ultimately doomed assignment.

*Sacajawea* had not worked out for him, had not worked out for anyone, really, and after her demise, he had been more than happy to return to the home he had left behind. He had brought Alendra with him.

She had been one of the very few officers who had sided with him in the conflict with her captain and she had made a great impression on him in other ways as well. Like many young officers during the war, particularly those serving on smaller vessels, Alendra had been a true jack-of-all-trades, serving at various times as a pilot, an engineer, at ops, and at tactical. She was also thrust into the position of XO before So'Dan had come onboard, pretty much by default, thanks to being the most veteran officer amongst a crew made up predominantly of enlisted personnel and fresh-faced ensigns just barely out of the Academy.

She had been a good fit on *Eagle* and had quickly become a reliable relief tactical officer, just behind him on the depth chart, since his previous number two, Lieutenant Trinik, had left the ship to advance his own career. And her varied experience and versatility allowed her to serve as a general duty officer on the bridge, taking over pretty much any position if the occasion called for it.

So'Dan had taken her under his wing just like he had back on *Sacajawea* but with much greater success this time and it had become clear that she was just as capable in her new position as he had expected her to be, especially since she was allowed to serve in a much more conducive and nurturing environment than she had ever been exposed to on the only other assignment she had known.

And So'Dan could not deny that he had taken a liking to the young officer under his command, assuming the role of her mentor and friend with great pleasure. And if their banter was any indication, she was just as happy with the way things had worked out for her on *Eagle*.

Once she had disappeared into the junction at the far end of the crawlway, So'Dan turned back around and headed in the other direction where he spotted Nora Laas squatting by the opposite junction where she had been monitoring field strengths on the power taps he and Alendra had been modifying. It became quickly apparent, however, that she had been monitoring something else entirely, judging by the dark scowl the Bajoran security chief was throwing So'Dan as he headed her way.

"What?" he asked as he approached.

"You know what."

So'Dan's response was a blank expression as he stepped out of the maintenance tunnel. "No, not really."

"Don't give me that. You and Lieutenant Alendra."

"Marjorie? What about her?"

She stared at him incredulously. "You're kidding, right?"

"We get along well if that's what you mean. It's called developing a rapport."

She pointed back toward the Jeffries tube. "That was not rapport building. The two of you are behaving like infatuated school children and quite frankly it's unbecoming and inappropriate."

Now it was So'Dan's turn to look at her askance. "I think you're exaggerating. We're just friendly with each other."

She shook her head and pointed at the two of them. "We are friendly with each other and we don't do ... whatever the hells that back there was. You're a senior officer, So. What's more, she's your subordinate."

"You're serious about this," So'Dan realized. "I don't get it. Technically, I outrank you, too. That doesn't mean we cannot be friends."

She uttered a frustrated sigh. "And that's obviously not what I'm talking about. Besides, we have known each other for years and you are not my direct superior. You have known her for how long? A few months? I cannot believe you don't see how this is wrong."

"And I don't understand why you would believe it is," he shot back.

"Prophet's preserve me, how could you possibly be so dense about this?"

So'Dan was not willing to concede. "Even if you're right, and my friendship with Marjorie is inappropriate—which I don't believe to be the case—since when are you so concerned about interpersonal behavior on this ship?"

Laas squared her shoulders almost defensively. "Somebody has to care. And as senior officers, we should act as role models. Things have always been very lax on this ship when it comes to discipline. Too lax. And you know what happens when we stop worrying about discipline and everyone acts the way they want to? That's chaos, So. That's how people die. We lost more than enough people during the war and I for one am sick and tired of attending memorial services. People have to realize that this isn't a pleasure cruise. We're Starfleet officers and we must—"

She stopped herself in mid-sentence and So'Dan had noticed that her face had started to turn a shade of red.

"Laas, are you alright?"

"I'm fine, I just need a moment," she said and then reached for the collar of her gold turtleneck uniform shirt, first pulling at it and then opening the fastener. "It's just gotten really hot in here."

He looked around. "I don't believe that's the case."

"No, it is hot. And really stuffy," she said and gasped for air.

"Laas, there's nothing wrong with the environmental systems. This is you. Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine, I just need a moment," she took just one step but then collapsed. Hew was right there to catch her before she could fall to the floor.

"You're not fine at all," he said and reached for her forehead. "You're burning up."

She tried to stand again. "Maybe I just need a glass of water or some—"

She never finished that sentence and instead collapsed again against him, her eyes fluttering shut.

"Laas? Laas!"

But she was no longer responsive.

"Leva to sickbay. Medical emergency, deck twelve, Jefferies tube junction sixty-four Baker. I need some help here right away."

\* \* \*

So'Dan had spent most of the rest of the day in sickbay, Laas' health having become a much greater concern than completing the overhaul of *Eagle*'s weapons systems.

After all, he had known her since they had served together on Deep Space Two nearly ten years ago, and they had become good friends along the way. During all this time, he had never seen her like this. She had always been the very epitome of a fighter both physically as well as mentally—not always by choice—having grown up on the war-torn Bajor and then later choosing a career first as a Starfleet Marine and then later as a security officer.

He knew that she had been hit hard by the death of their former first officer Eugene Edison with whom she had been in a short but intense relationship, but even that she had weathered with her usual resilience and fortitude.

He had been relieved when she had regained consciousness only a few minutes after she had been beamed to sickbay and the medical staff had begun to treat her. Unsurprisingly, her first instinct had been to try to downplay the entire episode and insist to be released to her quarters.

But Doctor Katanga had flat-out refused any such request once he had arrived, even if he did admit that he wasn't entirely sure what had caused her blackout. Laas tried to blame it on having tasted a new and particularly spicy meal while visiting Earth the night before, but Katanga was adamant that she stayed overnight for further observation.

Nora had objected, of course, but it had been of little use. So'Dan had reluctantly left when she had practically demanded that his time was better spent going back to work than hovering over her while she was feeling perfectly fine.

By then it had been near the end of his shift and he had decided to call it a day. After finding Nora still asleep in sickbay the next morning, but being assured by the duty nurse that she had been stable and had shown no further signs of ill-health, he had met up with Alendra on the bridge.

"How's Lieutenant Nora?" she had asked the moment he had left the turbolift.

Leva joined her by the tactical console. "Resting. They say she's fine and she certainly sounded like her normal self last night. Practically, threw me out of sickbay all by herself."

Alendra smirked. "That sounds like Nora all right."

He nodded absentmindedly.

"Do they know what caused her passing out like that?"

Leva shook his head. "No, and that worries me."

She reached out to touch his arm, causing him to look into her eyes. "She'll be fine. Whatever's wrong, Doctor Katanga and his people will figure it out. And even if they can't, we're like two minutes away from the most advanced medical facilities in the quadrant."

"I suppose you're right." He hadn't told her about the conversation he'd had with Laas just before she had passed out. That he had argued with Laas about his relationship with her. He had wondered if it could have been the cause of this episode somehow but it was difficult to believe that Laas, of all people, could get so agitated over a perceived lack of discipline and workplace etiquette that it would cause her to lose consciousness.

The very same woman who had fought Cardassians all her life, who had gone toe-to-toe with Klingons, Nausicaans, and Jem'Hadar

on more occasions than most other people would have survived and had come out on top every time. The same woman who herself had been engaged in a short-lived but passionate affair with a senior officer.

"I think what we both need is some busy work to take our minds off things," she said and turned toward the console. "We still have to complete the simulations to test the new enhancements we made yesterday."

"We never got to finish them."

She shot him a smirk over her shoulder. "I did. I went back last night and finished the calibrations on my own."

"What would I do without you?"

She shrugged. "Probably go back to running your team incredibly inefficiently."

"Now that's out of line, Lieutenant."

"I beg your pardon, Commander," she said with a widening smirk decorating her blue lips. "Just callin'em as I see'em. Besides, if we get this all done on schedule, who knows, maybe there'll be time to catch some R&R planetside. There are some places on Earth I wouldn't mind getting a good look at."

He considered her suspiciously. "This was a voluntary assignment. You could have taken shore leave instead of staying behind and working on this."

"And miss out on all the fun?"

"Right," he said as he began to set up the simulation on the tactical station. "What places?" he said, without making eye contact.

"I hear great things about Anguilla."

He nodded. "Nice beaches."

"Just the place to try out my new swimsuit. It's the absolute latest in fashion design. Uses invisible force fields to hold the fabric in place."

"You don't say," he said, now making every effort to keep his eyes on the console instead of looking up at the Bolian whose tone had suddenly become much more playful.

"Just need somebody to model it for."

"I might know somebody. But first, there is still a lot of work to do. We need to see how the calibrations hold up. And seeing that

you've done many of these by yourself if they are off, you know I'm going to have to blame you."

"Sure, blame the new gal," she said as she stuck out her lower lip.

They went to work and began running one weapons simulation after the next while monitoring the simulated energy usage and power distribution as it flowed through the recently recalibrated conduits. Ten minutes into their work, they were interrupted by an incoming signal that lit up the comms display.

"Will you look at that?" said Alendra as she brought up the details of the sub-space message. "Private message for a Lieutenant Commander So'Dan Leva. Who do you know on the *Turing*?"

Leva gave her a puzzled look. "Nobody I can think of."

"Want to take it in the ready room?" she asked, knowing that with Captain Owens not on the ship and Star off-duty, the captain's office adjacent to the bridge was available.

"Put it on screen here."

The larger-than-life face that greeted So'Dan was perhaps the last one he had ever expected. The comely Romulan woman had a sly grin on her face, apparently enjoying his surprise at finding her contacting him from a Starfleet vessel.

"Donatra?"

She nodded. "*Hello, So'Dan. It's been a while.*"

Nearly two years in fact. He had met the Romulan officer as part of the delegation that had facilitated his diplomatic mission to Romulus alongside his sometimes mentor Osanus Dar and his fellow Romulan-born Starfleet officer Commander Xeris, in what had been an appeal to the Romulan government to join the war effort against the Dominion. The mission had been a success, even if other events had factored into the praetor's ultimate decision to turn against the Dominion and join the Federation and the Klingons.

Donatra had acted as a liaison to him while she had reintroduced him to the world of his mother that he had left behind when he had been but a child. Showing him a side of Romulus he had never known, one that seemed to be tolerant and accepting of half-breeds like him. That, mixed with his budding feelings for the alluring Donatra, had very nearly led to her convincing him to stay on Romulus and make it his home once more.

As it had turned out, however, Donatra had been on a very specific mission to attempt his defection from Starfleet. She had offered a full confession afterward but also claimed that she had not carried out the mission voluntarily. While their relationship had understandably suffered from this revelation, So'Dan and Donatra had parted on relatively good terms.

*"How have you been?"*

He nodded slowly. "Considering the circumstances, I am well."

Her bright lips turned upward for a smile. "*I am glad. And I'm certain you have been wondering about me contacting you. From a Starfleet vessel no lees.*"

*"That thought had crossed my mind."*

*"I am part of a delegation that has been invited to Earth for a diplomatic summit between our people to discuss post-war relations. To be honest, I expect it to be a rather dry affair that ends up going nowhere in the end. Regardless, I understand you too are currently on Earth. Perhaps you could return the favor I once extended to you when you visited my home."*

*"I am not so certain how much of a favor that truly was."*

She offered a little nod, but her good cheer did not appear to be affected. "I suppose you are right. I just didn't take you for a man to hold grudges."

*"Used to be."*

She raised an eyebrow in a way that would have put a Vulcan to shame. "*And nowadays?*"

*"Nowadays I see things a little differently."*

*"How does that bode for me, I wonder?"*

"I suppose you find out once you get here," he said and offered a smile of his own.

Her grin widened. "*Why, Commander Leva, one might think you've got Romulan blood pumping through those veins of yours. This enigmatic side suits you. The Turing is scheduled to arrive at Earth in eighteen hours. Until then. Donatra Out.*"

And with that, her face disappeared from the screen.

Alendra stared blankly at Leva. "That was ... interesting."

He nodded but said nothing.

*"Okay, so who is she?"*

It took him a moment to sort his thoughts again after the unexpected call. "Donatra. She's an officer in the Romulan Guard."

"Yes, I gathered that much from her uniform. But what is she to you? How do you know her?"

"That's a long story.

She crossed her arms below her chest. "We've got time. Eighteen hours from what I hear."

He glanced her way. "Do me a favor and finish up here if you don't mind," he said and then left the bridge.

"Right," she said while he was already heading for the turbolift. "Good talk."

\* \* \*

"We eventually got to see the praetor at a lavish reception he held for the diplomatic envoy during which he officially announced the Star Empire joining the allied war effort. Truthfully, I'm fairly certain that the suspiciously well-timed assassination of Senator Vreenak played a much more pivotal role in convincing him to abandon the Dominion than anything our envoy ever did or said. We did get to taste the absolutely worst imitation of champagne known in the universe, however. So, there is that. It does make me wonder if replicated *kali-fal* tastes that awful to Romulans used to the real thing."

Leva and Alendra were back in the Jefferies tube only a few short hours after the surprising call he had received on the bridge, in order to complete the weapon and shield modifications, this time sans Nora Laas who to So'Dan's relief had been released to her quarters to rest.

He had tried to learn more about what had caused her blackout but neither Doctor Katanga nor Laas had been in a sharing mood. And while he was still concerned about his friend, it had been the Romulan woman who had been on his mind for the last few hours.

"Pass me the flux coupler, please," he said, once again working inside a maintenance hatch with Alendra sitting by his side and passing him the tools he needed.

This time the requested device was not being placed in his waiting palm.

"Marjorie?"

"Huh?"

"Flux coupler."

"Oh, yes," she said quickly and then promptly turned to the toolbox and fished out the requested device, handing it over. "Sorry."

So'Dan closed his hand over it and brought his arm back into the hatch to apply the tool to the power tap they were working on.

"What you're saying is that the only reason this Donatra woman got close to you in the first place was because she was working for the Tal Shiar on a mission to get you to defect."

"She's not Tal Shiar, she's Guard. But yes, she was pressured into a mission to make me switch allegiances. It wasn't something she wanted to do and she developed second thoughts. That's why she eventually came clean. Phase decompiler."

Alendra was not going back for the tools. "That's what she told you. After you figured out what her real agenda was."

Sensing that she was having trouble accepting this, So'Dan re-emerged from the hatch and sat next to her in the Jefferies tube. "Yes. And I believe her."

She nodded absentmindedly. "But you don't really know, do you? She could actually be a Tal Shiar agent. Even now as she's coming to Earth to take part in some sort of conference. Shouldn't you let Starfleet know about her? About the possible risks she might pose. She could be a spy."

"I don't think she is."

"But that's my point. You don't know this for a fact. That's an awfully big risk to take."

"I'm sure Starfleet Intelligence has fully vetted the delegation and will ensure none of them have access to sensitive locations or data," he said, looking at her with growing suspicion. "Why do I feel there is something else you're worried about?"

"She played you once, I just don't want you to get played again," she said. "From the sounds of it, she was manipulating whatever positive feelings you still hold for Romulus and..."

"And what?" he said when she didn't continue.

"And used her sensuality to get to you."

He laughed out loud.

"I don't actually think this is funny."

"You're saying she seduced me."

"Didn't she?"

He uttered a heavy sigh. "I don't think so," he said but then changed his mind slightly. "Well, maybe at first. But there was more to it than that."

"You still have feelings for her, even after everything she did?" She shook her head. "So, you can't let her get to you like that again. I don't even think you should talk to her at all. Let her do whatever business she came here for and stay far away. You cannot trust that woman."

"I know you're trying to look out for me but that isn't necessary, trust me. And the fact of the matter is, I know her much better than you do. I think I know what kind of person she truly is. I'll return the favor she once extended me, even if it was just a pretense. And if I sense that there is anything else going on, anything beyond the obvious, then I make sure I take the necessary steps." He handed the flux coupler back to her. "Let's call it a day, the *Turing* is due to arrive in a couple of hours and I want to get ready. Take a couple of days off, take some shore leave, maybe go down to Anguilla. We can finish up with the new shield grid when I come back." He gave her a parting smile and then headed for the junction.

"What if you don't see it?" she called after him.

He turned to look back at her. "See what?"

"Anything beyond the obvious."

"I'm a trained tactical officer," he said as he continued to make his way down the tube. "I'm pretty sure I can read between the lines."

"Yeah? I'm not so sure you can," she mumbled in a way he almost didn't hear."

"Don't worry, everything will be fine."

\* \* \*

The Romulan delegation that had been brought to Earth by the *Turing* had been housed at a Starfleet compound in Shanghai for the duration of their visit, close enough to Paris and San Francisco where

they would spend most of their time, and yet not close enough to the very nerve centers of the Federation and Starfleet to possibly pose a threat. It was a subtle message by the powers that were that the Federation was hoping to normalize the mostly hostile relations that had existed between their respective people for centuries before the Dominion War, but that real trust between the Federation and the Romulan Empire was not yet a reality.

So'Dan had been one of the few individuals who had been cleared to visit the delegation, thanks to his connections with his fellow Romulan in exile and on-again-off-again mentor Osanus Dar. Dar had apparently been instrumental in making these talks possible.

Security, however, remained tight, many had not forgotten the events that had taken place the last time a Romulan delegation had visited Earth four years earlier during the Antwerp Conference that had ended in disaster when the Dominion had detonated a bomb, killing twenty-seven people.

The incident had become infamous for not only marking the beginning of the Dominion aggression against the Alpha Quadrant but also for being the deadliest attack on Earth in over a century, shattering a period of unprecedented peace that had been enjoyed by its populace. Of course, the Antwerp bombing eventually became nothing more than a prelude to the devastating Breen attack on San Francisco during the height of the Dominion War.

So'Dan met Donatra in the beautifully maintained inner courtyard of the compound she was staying at, judging by her smile, she had been waiting for him.

"*Jolan tru*," he said, using the traditional Romulan greeting.

"And hello to you, So'Dan."

He was immediately struck how much better she looked in person than on the viewscreen, still wearing her short, Romulan military-style haircut that highlighted her perfectly tapered ears, her gracefully upswept brow as well as her expressive eyes and her bright lips. He couldn't help but find her attractive even in her bulky gray Romulan uniform.

"Welcome to Earth," he said.

"Glad to be here. Gladder still you could be."

He nodded. "How have you been?"

"It's been a tough few years," she said, her voice taking on a

more serious tone now and he could certainly sympathize with the sentiment.

The war had been hard on the Romulans as well, although they had not exactly been forthcoming with precise numbers on their losses and while they were likely much lower than those of the Federation and the Klingons who had fought the Dominion for longer, the Romulans had suffered a great deal as well, after all, there had been no half-measures when they had joined the war effort, they had thrown everything they'd had at the enemy and even that had very nearly not been enough.

So'Dan was pleased that she seemed to have survived the war intact. "Yes, for all of us."

"But that's behind us now, isn't it? Time to look forward and all that."

"I believe that's what has brought you here."

"Quite an interesting development, wouldn't you say?"

He nodded but didn't speak for a moment. He continued before the silence between them threatened to become awkward. "I understand I have you for the rest of the day."

"That's right. I have been handed over into your care. I'm all yours as they say. My official mission is to immerse myself in human culture to better appreciate our former enemy and perhaps a potential ally one day."

"You almost make it sound like a chore."

She laughed. "I suppose that all depends on my guide."

"I shall try to make this as memorable as I can. But remember, I'm only partly human. I might not be the best person to make you appreciate this planet's culture."

"Something tells me I won't have any complaints. Where do we start?"

Leva took a moment to take in his surroundings. The compound was just outside of Shanghai and completely walled in but did allow a peek at the metropolis' impressive skyline. "We could start right here. Shanghai is one of Earth's most vibrant cities."

She frowned. "I got to see some of it on our shuttle ride in. To be honest, it's not quite my kind of thing. A lot of modern super skyscrapers. I've seen this on Romulus and countless other worlds."

He nodded. "Shanghai has changed much over the centuries. It didn't fare well during Earth's various wars and was rebuilt several times. I suppose it has lost some of its unique character, but it remains a great melting pot of Western and Eastern influences."

Donatra didn't look impressed.

"Tell you what," he said. "We're actually not too far from the place I spent most of my early years after leaving Romulan space. It's still quite a historic place, even today."

At that, she lit up. "I wouldn't mind seeing your old stomping grounds. The place that tamed your wild Romulan blood," she said with a smirk.

"Don't know about tamed," he said and then nodded her way. "Before we leave, perhaps consider changing your attire?"

She looked down at her uniform. "What's wrong with it?"

"There aren't many Romulans on Earth, so it depends on how much you want to stick out."

Donatra nodded. "I guess it's only fair. We made you change into more local garments when you came to visit."

Twenty minutes and one outfit later, the two set out via shuttle, heading east, Donatra having changed into a simple, tan suit which if it hadn't been for her ridged brow made her look almost Vulcan. So'Dan had remained in his uniform.

"So where are we heading?" she asked as the shuttle left the Chinese mainland behind and headed over open waters.

"A place called Kyoto on the Japanese island. My father lived there for some time before he met my mother and we kept our principal residence there. If you're looking for Earth culture and history, you won't find too many places that offer more on this side of the planet. It's a city that hasn't changed all that much over the last few centuries."

It took the shuttle mere minutes to reach Honshu, the Japanese main island and So'Dan slowed them down once they were back over land to allow his passenger to take in the green and hilly landscape below.

"This almost reminds me of Romulus," she said as he turned to look at him. "No wonder you chose to live here."

"I'm not sure if I would use the word chose. I couldn't wait to get away from here fast enough when I was younger. Joined Starfleet

as soon as I was old enough. I think in hindsight I was probably a little too rash with my decisions. I suppose I was a fairly angry young man back then."

She grinned. "Some insights into So'Dan Leva's inner psyche? This trip is certainly full of surprises."

"Well, don't expect many of those."

He brought the shuttle down at a landing port near the center of the historic city where they disembarked and began to explore the town on foot and public transport, So'Dan taking her to see several majestic Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples that had survived for centuries and proudly reflected historic Japanese architecture which Donatra seemed to appreciate.

"Considering how violent I hear Earth history has been, I'm surprised to find so much of its architecture has survived," she said as they strolled through the gorgeous moss garden of the Saihō-ji temple.

"Earth has also experienced nearly two centuries of peace before the Dominion War."

"Maybe. But for thousands of years before that, humans were at war with each other over petty national and religious conflicts. Trust me, most people outside this solar system are stupefied how Earth and its people managed to not only survive but also become the center of a galactic superpower."

He offered a smile. "I did not know you were a scholar of Earth history."

"Romulans believe that knowing their enemy is essential to securing victory."

"I didn't think we were still enemies."

She shrugged. "We were when I was taught about Earth."

He nodded and then stopped when they had reached the temple proper.

"What is it?"

"Two hundred meters behind us. A woman in a dark suit. I think she has been following us since we left Tō-ji," he said.

Donatra uttered a little, amused laugh.

"What?"

"She has been following us since we left the shuttle. Her and her partner. What I cannot tell is if they are just bad at trying to be inconspicuous or if they are just not trying very hard at all. Letting me know that we are being watched."

"They're with Starfleet? Federation Security maybe?"

She nodded. "You didn't honestly think they would let a Romulan walk around on Earth supervised solely by one Starfleet officer who himself has some Romulan blood coursing through his veins?"

"I suppose not."

"I don't blame them. Besides, it's not as if we weren't watched when I took you on a tour of the capital back on Romulus. Trust me we had a lot more eyes on us than we do now."

So'Dan nodded slowly. "You spotted them pretty quickly though."

"I tend to be pretty mindful of my surroundings. Particularly in unfamiliar territory."

But he didn't look fully convinced and Donatra could tell. She smirked. "You think I made them because I'm a spy? An agent of the Tal Shiar?"

"After all we've been through, do you really blame me?"

She turned away from him. "I suppose not. I probably deserve your mistrust."

He took a step toward her. "You did work for them. You got close to me to get me to defect. Those are facts."

"Right. And what could I possibly say now that would make you trust me? To make you believe that I hated what I did to you. I hated it until I realized that I enjoyed your company so much, I was actually excited about the prospect of being successful in my mission. Of you staying on Romulus. With me."

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "And I almost did. Because of you."

She shrugged him off. "But now you'll never be able to trust me again. Now, whenever you look at me there'll be that voice in the back of your head, trying to warn you, telling you not to get too close because I might not be what you think I am."

He considered the ancient temple for a moment as he tried to collect his thoughts. She was right, of course, everything she had said

was absolutely true. It also meant that Lieutenant Donatra was either one of the best Romulan agents the Tal Shiar had ever produced, or a person desperately trying to atone for her past actions. So'Dan wanted to believe the latter. He turned back to face her even while she kept her back to him. "I don't know about you, but it's a risk I'm willing to take."

She very slowly turned back around. "Are you now?"

He shrugged. "As long as you don't ask me to reveal Federation secrets."

Donatra laughed. "You really think that the Tal Shiar doesn't already know whatever secrets you could share?"

"Now that hurts."

They continued their sightseeing tour of Kyoto until the late evening and left the city after an extensive seafood dinner in one of the city's famous eateries.

Donatra had asked him to return with her to her room in the compound in Shanghai where she claimed to have a surprise for him.

"I can't wait to see it," he had said with a gleam in his eyes.

"You're fortunate I'm not a telepath because I'm sure I don't care where your mind has wandered off to."

He had smartly suppressed any further commentary after that.

As it turned out the surprise had been a case of eight bottles containing an azure beverage.

So'Dan could hardly complain as he quickly pulled one of the bottles out of the case. "Authentic *kali-fal*? Now that is a surprise."

"I remember how much you took to it," she said and then produced a couple of glasses. "I think a few drinks won't hurt."

He didn't say no. After having spent a lifetime mostly reviling the beverage, he'd found a new appreciation for it after his journey to Romulus. He wasn't entirely sure if this was because he had never before tasted the real thing — after all, he had been too young to try it when he had lived in Romulan space as a child — or because his visit to his former home had somehow changed his complicated attitude toward his Romulan heritage which he had taken pains to ignore or outright deny after having turned his back on that culture. Perhaps it had everything to do with his budding feelings for Donatra herself after he had first met her.

Regardless, he had joined her eagerly in opening a bottle, and just like two years earlier, it hadn't stopped there.

\* \* \*

Different from their encounter two years earlier, this time there had been no rushed departure by Donatra. Whereas last time she had attempted to sneak away even before he had awoken, So'Dan found her just where he had left her the night before, laying in bed next to him.

"*Jolan tru*," he whispered softly as her eyes started to flutter open.

Her response was a satisfied little purr.

"Just as good as you remembered it?"

She smirked. "Better," she said.

He nodded.

"What time is it?" she asked through still only half-opened eyes.

He turned his head toward the window and the sun streaming into the room. "Late morning, I'd guess."

She pressed herself closer against him. "Too early."

"Agreed." He brushed his hand against her cheek and then moved in closer to kiss her. "We could stay like this the whole day as far as I'm concerned. I have nowhere I need to be."

Donatra stopped suddenly and pulled back. "I do."

"Huh?"

"Computer. What is the time?"

A soft trill acknowledged the inquiry. "The time is ten thirty-four hours."

Her eyes opened wide as she rolled away from him and practically fell out of bed. It was only a momentary setback as she shot back up onto her feet and then rushed into the washroom.

So'Dan smirked as he watched her naked, retreating form. "I take it you're late for something."

"The conference," she called out from the washer as he heard the sonic shower coming to life. "Starfleet Headquarters in twenty-six minutes. Is that within walking distance?"

So'Dan couldn't suppress a laugh. She may have studied Earth history but clearly, geography had not been part of her lesson plan. "Not quite. Another continent altogether."

She uttered a colorful Romulan curse.

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll get priority transporter access. And even if not, I can probably pull some strings."

She emerged just six minutes later and So'Dan was impressed what she had been able to accomplish in that time. She looked spotless, already dressed in her uniform, not a hair out of place and even her lip coloring was perfectly applied.

"I'm a soldier girl," she said after noticing his surprise. "Being ready is half the battle."

He nodded. "Will I see you after the conference?"

She sighed. "I am not certain it will be possible. The schedule for the next two days is fairly tight. A lot of conferences and meetings and when I'm not in one of those, I will have review sessions with my delegation. This was really the only time I could make available for us."

"In that case, I'm glad we made such good use of it."

Donatra smiled.

"What's next after the conference?"

She walked over to a mirror to adjust her uniform even if So'Dan couldn't see the need. "I've already been assigned to a ship as a weapons officer. The fleet needs every available hand maintaining order in the Cardassian territory."

He didn't like the sound of that. None of the stories coming out of that area had been positive since the war had ended. The Federation, Klingons, and Romulans had divided up the territory which had formerly been part of the Cardassian Union amongst themselves. Some former Cardassian military hardliners had taken arms to oppose the occupation by any means necessary. Blood had already been spilled on all sides, and as expected, the Klingons and Romulans were particularly ruthless in quelling any unrest.

"Could you not request an assignment somewhere else? Somebody with your diplomatic experience could be invaluable right here on Earth working for the Romulan mission."

She turned away from the mirror to face him. "I know what you're trying to do, So'Dan and I don't think I appreciate it. No matter what is happening between the two of us, I am and always will be a loyal Romulan soldier. And I will go wherever I am needed most. Do whatever I must to serve Romulus. You understand this, don't you?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, of course."

"Good, I wanted to make sure you knew where we stand."

"About that. Where exactly do we stand? What is this thing between us exactly?"

She walked over to the bed where he was sitting up against the headrest and she leaned down to kiss him. Then she regarded him for a moment. "I like you, So'Dan Leva."

He smirked. "Good to know."

Then she uttered a little sigh. "To answer your question, I don't really know. This isn't exactly conventional. But I think we need to be realistic about what is possible considering our respective positions. I like you but I am not giving up my life. And I don't think you are either."

He considered those words for just a moment. "Funny you would say that considering that I almost gave up my life under similar circumstances."

She frowned, clearly not sure how to respond to this.

He waved it off. "Sorry, that wasn't entirely fair."

"There's some truth to it, I suppose."

But he shook his head. "I am and always have been of two worlds and I have struggled with that all my life. Intentional or not, you opened my eyes to something I had tried to ignore for a long time. That I'm as much Romulan as I am human."

"And for what it's worth, I think you represent the best parts of both our people."

It was a nice sentiment, he thought, even if he was not sure he shared it. He had made his fair share of poor decisions in his life after all.

She headed for the doors but stopped short and looked at him one last time. "We will see each other again; of that, I have no doubt. Thank you for trusting me and for the time we got to spend together. *Jolan tru, So'Dan.*"

"Until we meet again."

She gave him one last smile and then was out of the door and at least for now, it seemed, out of his life again.

So'Dan uttered a heavy sigh and let himself fall back onto the bed. As far as he was concerned, he really had nowhere else to be.

\* \* \*

After a rather awkward encounter with the local Starfleet personnel running the compound during which he had struggled to explain his presence in Donatra's quarters, So'Dan had decided to return to *Eagle*. After all, the modifications on the tactical systems were still not complete, and focusing on work, he figured, was favorable to staying on Earth which at least for the moment reminded him too much of the short but memorable time he had spent with Donatra.

*Eagle* was still running with a skeleton crew and was mostly occupied by spacedock's maintenance personnel and a few crewmembers who had decided not to take the offered shore leave.

One of the first things he had done was to check in on Laas and he had learned that she had since been fully cleared by Doctor Katanga and was apparently no longer onboard the ship. He had taken some comfort in that. If she felt well enough to spend time planetside, she was probably over whatever had affected her.

He had contacted Alendra next to meet her in main engineering to discuss the next phase of the weapons and shields overhaul they had started a few days earlier.

The Bolian arrived late and So'Dan quickly noticed that she wasn't quite herself. Her facial expressions were difficult to read as if she was trying to keep them purposefully neutral.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Commander?"

He shot her a puzzled look at the unexpected formality that had crept into her tone. "I had a good time," he said nodding. "As I said, there was nothing to worry about, I have not been turned into a

Romulan spy by sinister Tal Shiar machinations," he added with a grin that completely failed to find any acknowledgment.

"Anyway," he continued. "I thought we carry on where we left off. I've already run a diagnostic on the primary phaser couplers and we've achieved a throughput improvement of nearly five percent. I think we can do even better before we move on to the torpedo guidance systems and the new shield grid."

"Right," she said, "we'll just pick up where we left off."

"Is there a problem with that?"

She shook her head. "No problem, sir. Except that I've been thinking about what you've told me before you left. I do believe I should take some shore leave," she said and then presented him with a padd she had been hiding behind her back.

"What's this?" he said as he took the device and glanced it over.

"My request for shore leave, sir."

He frowned. The request she had put in writing would practically keep her away from the ship until *Eagle* was scheduled to depart for her next mission. There would be no time at all to continue their work together. There was no question that she was entitled to the leave, but it had not been what he had expected.

Alendra noticed his confusion. "I am planning on visiting my family on Bolarus, I haven't seen them since the war first broke out. Unless, of course, you have an objection."

"I ... no, of course not. I just thought—"

She took the padd back from him. "Thank you, sir," she turned and began to walk away.

"Marjorie?"

She stopped to turn and face him again.

"You are upset?"

She laughed mirthlessly. "You're a trained tactical officer. Clearly, you can read between the lines."

He wasn't sure what to say to that.

Alendra took a few steps back toward him. "You said earlier that you can see the obvious but, to be honest, I'm not so convinced of that. I'll be back in a week, maybe you've figured it out by then." Her body went stiff. "Permission to be dismissed, sir."

He hesitated for only a moment and then nodded. "Permission granted."

She turned on her heel and this time walked away with purpose, leaving So'Dan behind.

He looked after her with a blank look on his face, not missing the fact that Alendra was the second woman he had watched walking out on him on the same day. He couldn't help but start wondering if Laas hadn't been right all along.

He wasn't sure what he was going to do next, the only thing he knew for certain was that just a few days earlier, the galaxy had seemed like a much less complicated place.

## Awakening

**May 2376**

She hadn't been able to remember any of the details of her conversation with So'Dan in the Jeffries tube when she had come back to in sickbay. Laas had recalled that the topic of conversation had been interpersonal relationships aboard the ship, particularly So'Dan's relationships with his subordinates, but for the life of her, she couldn't remember what her argument had been about or what had initiated it.

So'Dan, who had displayed great concern over her condition, perhaps even some guilt, had tried to gently remind her that she had made a rather heated point about how she had disagreed with how his relationship with Lieutenant Alendra had developed.

This in itself seemed odd, considering that she liked the young Bolian officer who had only come aboard a few months earlier after her previous ship, the same one on which So'Dan had served a very short stint as first officer, had been lost.

Ultimately, she had given up on trying to remember the exact nature of what So'Dan had claimed had turned into an argument

and, having grown somewhat tired of his well-meaning concern over her health, she had insisted that he leave her alone and get on with whatever work needed to be done.

Laas didn't like people fussing over her.

She was also not used to waking up in sickbay. Not if there hadn't been a battle and scars to prove it. Had it not been for Starfleet's advanced dermal regeneration technology, she'd still be covered with evidence from her days as a resistance fighter on Bajor and later a Marine.

But there had been no scars to treat this time. She had passed out without warning or apparent cause. That's what she had been told by Doctor Katanga.

She didn't believe it for one second.

"How much longer is this going to take?" she asked the veteran physician who was in the process of reviewing her latest scans on a large screen in sickbay while she watched on, sitting on a biobed. It had been three hours since she had awoken, almost five since she had apparently passed out, and she still had no answers. None that she thought were satisfactory.

"It'll take as long as it takes," he said.

She uttered a heavy sigh. "Fine. But can I at least return to my quarters? I've been here for half a day and I feel fine. I promise I won't do any heavy lifting."

Katanga turned to look at her with an annoyed expression. "If your reason for being here were related to you physically overexerting yourself, I would have released you an hour ago. But it's not."

"Then it must be something I ate. I told you some of that Earth food—"

"Does not agree with you," Katanga said, completing the sentence for her. It wasn't difficult, after all, she had tried to blame her current condition on her recent foray into Mexican cuisine a couple of times now. "If nothing else, I can say with a high degree of confidence that you didn't end up here because you ate a few too many hot peppers last night."

"Alright, Doctor, what's wrong with me then?"

He considered her for a moment as if rethinking what he was about to tell her. "I have my suspicions but something tells me you're not going to like them."

"Don't keep me in suspense," she said humorlessly.

The doors to the sickbay opened to allow another member of the medical staff to enter. Only at a second glance did she realize that the newcomer was not a specialist in physical health. Alex Clancy was an assistant counselor with whom she was fairly familiar with after she had worked closely with him on a murder case last year.

She felt her entire body tensing suddenly upon seeing him now, the implication pretty obvious. Laas jumped off the biobed.

Clancy smiled at her. "Laas? How are you?

She shook her head and then looked back at Katanga. "No."

"At least give it a chance. Clearly, there is nothing physically wrong with you. You did pass out for a reason and if it's not physical —"

"You think I passed out because I'm psychologically damaged? I've got news for you, Doctor. Most people who go through a Cardassian occupation don't come out the other end without a few emotional scars. But I've already been through this before they even let me join Starfleet years ago. I don't have any long-simmering psychological hang-ups that would cause me to suddenly pass out," she said, struggling to keep her anger in check. "You've run your scans and you have my blood and whatever else you can take from me. Run more tests, find out what's wrong with me, physically, and once you know, come and find me. But I won't be sitting around here until you've figured it out." With that, she turned toward the doors and walked right past Clancy without uttering a single word to him.

"Lieutenant, I haven't released you yet," Katanga called after her.

Laas ignored him as she left sickbay.

\* \* \*

She had returned straight to her quarters and it hadn't taken very long for somebody to seek her out. So'Dan had been her first visitor

but she had turned him away after she had assured him that she was doing much better and just needed some alone-time.

Her second guest was not as easily dealt with and she had been hardly surprised when Alex Clancy showed up at her door and practically invited himself inside.

"I thought I had made myself pretty clear back in sickbay," she told him.

He nodded. "Oh, you did. But just a little piece of friendly advice. Don't go and ruffle Katanga's feathers. He's been doing this kind of thing too long to be put off by a stubborn security chief."

"He has no idea what's wrong with me," she said defensively.

"Well, he has an idea, you just don't want to listen to it."

Laas walked over to the couch under the viewports in her quarter and let herself fall. "So, what's he going to do? Get my own security team to bring me back in? In restraints?"

Clancy smirked. "After you stormed out of his sickbay, he was fairly close to doing just that. Keep in mind, as the chief medical officer on this ship he has that authority, and he's not afraid to use it."

"Judging by the fact that it's you who has darkened my doorstep, I assume that you've talked him out of it."

"Barely. But I did manage to calm him somewhat. Convince him that a more subtle approach might be the better way to go here."

She nodded. "Good. You wouldn't be a very good counselor if you couldn't calm down somebody upset."

Clancy took the chair opposite from her, keeping his eyes on the Bajoran. "Very true."

She saw what he was doing and quickly shook her head. "Don't do that. I told you, I don't need a counselor."

"Can we just talk? As friends?"

She sighed and avoided eye contact. "If you're going to start asking me about my childhood, I'm going to throw you out."

He offered another disarming smile. "I think I can work with that restriction."

Laas placed her boots onto the glass coffee table and leaned back on the couch. "All right, Counselor, let's talk. But if after this conversation we both decide that I'm perfectly fine, you go back to Katanga and you give me a clean bill of health. You back off and you make sure he does as well."

"That sounds like a challenge."

"I like challenges."

"I'm sure there must be something about that in my official counseling book. Don't bet on your patient's health. With your patient."

"Those are my terms. Take it or leave it."

He nodded after a moment. "Very well. But if we both agree that there is something that is bothering you, something psychological that may have been the cause for your panic attack, then you agree to further treatment."

She frowned at the word he used. "Fine. Let's get this over with. Do you need me to lie down?"

Clancy smirked. "No, I don't think that's necessary."

"Oh okay. I think I saw that in a holo-novel once."

"We're good like this. I'm not Freud."

"So, what is it you want to talk about?"

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Me? Nothing. If it were up to me, we wouldn't be talking at all."

"I try not to take that personally."

"Good."

Clancy got up and out of his chair and walked over to the replicator. "In my experience, a conversation is properly stimulated by an accompanying beverage. What can I get you?"

Laas considered that for a brief moment. "I'll have some kava juice."

"That sounds good, I don't think I've tried that yet. Is that Bajoran?"

She nodded and Clancy ordered two glasses, brought them to the table, and sat back down.

"This is pretty good," he said after trying his.

"I used to drink it as a child quite often," she said, took her boots off the table, and sipped from her glass. "It doesn't exactly remind me of better times. I suppose I just got used to the taste." She looked him square in the eye. "If this is some ploy to get me to start talking about Bajor, forget it."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"There isn't much to say anyway. I grew up in a war zone, my parents were worked to death in a labor camp, and my sister and I started fighting for the resistance from the moment I was big enough to raise a phaser."

"Something tells me there is plenty to talk about there but I get your point. Just tell me about what's been on your mind lately."

"Nothing out of the ordinary."

He smiled. "Let's start with the ordinary then."

"You want me to bore you with the routine? Fine with me. Let's see, I've been thinking about how to transition the latest security transfers that'll be joining us next week and how to fit them into the current duty roster. I've been thinking about what kind of training regimen I want to put them through, considering that they're all fresh from out of basic or the Academy. I've been considering getting my tactical bridge qualification renewed. And of course, I've been thinking about the work we need to do to overhaul the tactical systems."

Clancy nodded. "That's a lot of work-related thoughts. Anything on your mind not relating to your current duties?"

She considered that for a moment. "I've been thinking about our mission in the Valeria sector a few months ago."

"Go on."

"During that mission, I lead an assault team to what we thought at the time was a pirate base on the surface of a small moon. Star had entrusted me with trying to open a dialogue with them but as they were well-armed, I made the call to try to pacify them first."

"Which seemed to go contrary to your orders," Clancy observed.

"Well, it was more complicated than that. The other ship we were working with at the time had opened fire on the base from orbit."

"Right, I remember," said Clancy. "The *Sacajawea*. That was a hot mess alright."

She nodded. "I was left with very few options at that point, so I ordered the assault. Got into a pretty close scrape with a few of those pirates. Then I realized that it wasn't just a pirate base. They had whole families there."

"And that changed things for you?"

"Yes. I mean we were using non-lethal force, of course, but you can never be entirely sure of that when you fight people you've never fought before. Different races have different anatomies and tolerances. What affects a Bajoran in a certain way may not affect say a Klingon or a Valerian in the exact same manner. I didn't want to take the risk of killing innocents by mistake. I took a chance by appealing to their leader and he agreed to a cease-fire."

"That was a sensible call. Why do you think this particular episode has been on your mind lately?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Not sure. I guess I wonder if I would have had made that call before. During the war. Or even before that. It's not as if I hadn't been in similar situations before."

"You mean back on Bajor?"

She pierced him with a dark look.

Clancy raised his hands defensively. "Sorry. I swear I don't mean to go back there." He continued once Laas began to relax again, taking another sip of her juice.

"Let me ask you something else. That mission on the moon, it wasn't purely an assault then. Your orders were to establish contact."

She nodded.

"And is that usually the kind of away mission you would be leading? And I mean no offense by that, but you're the chief of security. Would something like that not be more in the wheelhouse of the first officer for example?"

"Yes, it would. But remember, the captain was back on Valeria and Star was in command."

Clancy thought this over for a moment. "If I recall the ship's command structure correctly, wouldn't Commander Xylion have been the acting first officer?"

"He was. But I suppose Star entrusted me with the mission. And yes, you're right, normally the first officer, or perhaps acting first officer, would have led an away mission like this. It was, however, a heavily armed away team, made up mostly of marines. Star expected trouble and she entrusted me to deal with it."

He nodded. "More than that, I'd say. She entrusted you to deal with any trouble and still find a way to open a dialogue. Which you did."

"Yes. So what?"

"I'm just conscious that your relationship with our first officer hasn't always been one based on trust. While we were working together on Gedar's murder case last year, you very nearly threw me out of your office the moment you realized I had been ordered by Commander Star to assist you."

She rolled her eyes. "Right. Star and I didn't get along well. That's no secret. We both got over it. Why would you want to bring this up again? I thought part of your job was to remedy things that might be broken, not try to examine the things that were eventually fixed."

"I know that your relationship significantly improved and don't get me wrong, I have no intention of trying to explore the cause for this. I'm certain neither one of us would like to dwell on that."

That dark look returned. "Good. Let's move on. You're running out of time."

"I'd like to focus on why you were so upset about Commander Star joining *Eagle* in the first place. You had a lot of anger over this at the time. As you said, it wasn't a secret and easy to discern even to the untrained eye."

"You're kidding, right? She was a criminal, she pretty much admitted to this. She was following orders which not only ran counter to ours but I'm fairly sure would be considered illegal in a court-martial. She had already been convicted in a previous one and sent to prison for getting people killed. The only reason she was let go was because of the war and the urgent need for experienced personnel."

Clancy nodded. "And I can see how all that would lead to some resentment, sure. But the captain trusted her enough to become his permanent first officer. She's risked her own life on multiple occasions to save hundreds, if not thousands of lives.

Most of the crew had started to accept her when you were still furious about her being on this ship. And you remained furious until the events of last year. What I'm trying to figure out is where your anger came from. Why you were fighting her for so long after everyone else seemed to have accepted her being here."

Laas simply stared back at him, saying nothing, her face an unreadable mask. The silence lasted almost an entire minute, neither of them attempting to break it.

Then she stood up suddenly. "You know what? This was just as pointless of an exercise as I thought it'd be and I'm done with it. I trust you know your way out," her voice was cold as ice.

Clancy left his chair. "I'll leave if that's what you want, Laas. But until you decide to face that question, I'm not sure you will get better. I think that panic attack you suffered, it could be just the beginning and sooner or later you or somebody you care about could get seriously hurt."

She said nothing.

"You tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it. I can go back to Doctor Katanga and tell him that I could find nothing wrong with you and no reason at all to keep you from your duties. I can tell him that the episode you experienced must have been a fluke, brought on by too little sleep and poor diet. But until you truly confront your pain over the loss of Gene Edison, I don't think that would be the truth, and eventually, it will catch up with you in a very bad way."

When Laas still refused to talk, he nodded slowly and walked back toward the exit.

"Alex?"

He stopped just as the door panels had opened for him and he looked back at her. She had tears in her eyes and her voice had sounded small and weak. He walked back to her, allowing the doors to close behind him again and they sat down next to each other on the couch.

"What do I do?" she asked. "How do I stop feeling like this? Like I lost something of myself, something I can never get back. How do I stop feeling like this all the time?"

"It's not going to be easy," he said as she leaned her head against his shoulder. "I'd be lying to you if I told you it was. Losing someone you loved is never easy and it shouldn't be. But Laas, I don't think you ever truly grieved for him either. He died nearly two years ago and from all, I can tell, you just went on with your life as normal."

"There was a war going on," she said, quietly.

"That war ended five months ago."

"So now what?"

"You're no stranger to losing people, I know this because of your background. As a Starfleet officer, as a Marine, and certainly, while you were fighting the Cardassians on your homeworld. You must have lost people close to you before. How did you grieve for them?"

She reached back for her juice and took another sip as if to give her strength to speak about this. "I don't think I ever allowed myself to get as close to anyone as I did with Gene. My sister died when we escaped Bajor together. That was hard for me, not just because I loved her but also because after she was gone, I was alone. And for the next few years, I pretty much remained on my own, drifting aimlessly from one refugee camp to the next. I remember that I cried a lot back then."

"Bajorans have always been a very spiritual people," said Clancy. "I know that many point to that faith as the reason your people were able to overcome the occupation."

But she shook her head. "I never had much use for the prophets, I don't know why. Maybe because my sister didn't truly believe in them. But I know that many others did and they drew strength from it. But that was never me. In some ways, I envied true believers. To have something they could believe in so strongly and without reservations."

Clancy thought about this for a moment. "I have an idea," he said and stood. "If you're willing."

She nodded slowly. "If it rids me of this pain, I'm willing to try whatever it takes."

\* \* \*

Clancy had invited Laas to join him in one of *Eagle's* holodecks the next morning. She had very nearly changed her mind before she had finally decided to take him up on his offer and find out what it was that he thought might help her overcome the feelings of despondency and loss she had only recently realized had been plaguing her.

It had been somewhat of a revelation that the reason she had been feeling so miserable lately, and in fact, had passed out while working with So'Dan—something she still could barely remember

happening at all—was all related to Gene Edison's death. Gene had been the only man she had ever truly loved and while their relationship had lasted mere months, it had been the most intense she had ever experienced.

Clancy had been right that she had not grieved his passing. At least not for long. She had mostly blamed herself for his death—after all, he had died saving her life—and had punished herself over and over again by painstakingly reliving the moments of his death in her head and rehashing all the things she could have done differently to ensure his survival, even at the cost of her own.

In the immediate aftermath of Gene's death, her life had been too busy to spend much time thinking about what she had lost. There had been a war to fight. And according to Clancy—she still wasn't totally convinced it was true—she had turned her grief and her anger toward Tazla Star, the woman who had come to replace Gene.

But she couldn't deny that since the war had ended, and since her relationship with Star had somewhat normalized, she had felt a growing and painful hole inside of her. She had worked hard to pretend it didn't exist, keeping herself occupied and distracted, but apparently, and according to Clancy, denial was not a good way of dealing with grief.

She had been very hesitant about Clancy's idea about using the holodeck because to her, the holodeck was nothing more than a training tool, not unlike visiting the gym. She went there to exercise and to drill members of her team by running through various combat scenarios.

She understood, of course, that most crewmembers liked to use the holodeck as a form of escapist entertainment, she had even taken part in a few of them herself on occasions, but in truth, it had never much appealed to her as such, and the idea that Clancy was going to use it as some sort of counseling instrument made her downright uncomfortable.

Her worst fears—that he had recreated Bajor during the occupation or even worse, had created a holographic version of Eugene Edison she was forced to face, were seemingly alleviated when she stepped through the heavy doors and found herself inside an alien-looking temple.

There was no denying that the building had a spiritual function, considering the serene environment, the pleasant smell of incense in the air, and the numerous colorful decorations, many of which reminded her of the decorations she had seen in Clancy's quarters the last time she had been there.

She would never have guessed when she had first met Alex Clancy, especially since he was a human, that he was a spiritual man.

The hall she found herself in wasn't very large and was open on all four sides to allow for a stunning view of the immense mountain range that completely surrounded it and in which this refuge was nestled in. The highest peaks, which by her estimation were only a few kilometers distant, were covered in snow and yet the temperature was mild and comfortable. In all likelihood, this was thanks to the climate settings of the program and not an actual reflection of the real location it was simulating.

She spotted three larger-than-life statues of sitting men inside the hall itself. All three had long beards and wore flowing robes, all seemed to have ancient wisdom carved deep into their eyes as they stared down at her.

"I see you have met the Three Pure Ones."

Laas turned to find Clancy. He had exchanged his Starfleet uniform for a bright red robe that looked not too different to those the statues were clad in.

"These are your gods?"

He nodded with a smile. "Something like that."

She looked around. "This is very nice. Very serene," she said and then glanced out toward the mountains again. "And quite the view. Where are we?"

"A place called Tibet down on Earth. These mountains form part of the Himalayas that have some of the highest peaks anywhere on Earth. It's actually even more stunning seeing the real thing. I'm sure we can arrange a proper visit but for now, I think this simulation will suffice for our purposes."

She nodded as she turned back to look over the hall with all its spiritual decorations and symbology. "So, are you trying to convert me to your religion?"

He shook his head. "Not at all. And this isn't about religion, it doesn't even have to be about spirituality. But I think some Taoist concepts might work for you. Worth a try if you're willing."

"What do we do? And should I change first?" she said, considering his robes and then her uniform which suddenly seemed terribly out of place.

"Whatever you are most comfortable in."

The truth was that Laas had always been most comfortable wearing the uniform. It was simple and straightforward, it stood for something she could believe in and it removed the necessity for her having to worry about what to wear. There had always been something reassuring about putting on a Starfleet uniform.

She made one concession, however, and unzipped and discarded her gray-shouldered jacket, leaving her in her gold shirt, black pants, and boots. "All right. So, tell me about this Daoism. What's it all about?"

He smiled at her. "In short, it's about living in balance with the universe. But maybe more so, it's about accepting who you are as a person and coming to terms with it."

She frowned, not fully understanding his rather cryptic description.

Clancy shook his head. "You know what, let's not worry about the deeper meaning of the philosophy. As I said, I'm not trying to convert you to a belief system or a set of rules. All this," he said, indicating their surroundings, "it's just ambiance. An environment to allow you to relax and meditate. I usually come here once a week and I think it helps me tremendously to center myself. Perhaps the same can work for you as well."

She nodded slowly. "I suppose I said I was willing to give this a chance. How does it work?"

"The aim is to attain true inner peace, to identify the things that trouble you, to see them inside yourself, and to excise them. Now I'm not saying that this will solve all your problems, and certainly not on your first attempt, but it might be the first step in the right direction," he said and then sat down. Laas watched him take on a pose in which he fully crossed his legs so that his feet were resting on his thighs. She had to admit that she was surprised by how limber he was since she

had already proven on occasions that she was by far more athletic. "This is a classic meditation position but you don't have to—"

She managed to replicate the pose after only a couple of tries and then shot him a smile. "Agility has never been a problem for me."

"Of course not," he said, returning her smile. "Now, the key to this is to find a way for your body to remain very still. People who have practiced this kind of meditation for years can usually remain in such a state for hours, but for right now, let's just try this for a few minutes at a time."

She nodded, "I can do a few minutes of this."

"Good. Posture will also help, try to keep your spine erect and your hands in your lap."

Laas watched him do it and then quickly followed suit.

"Next comes breathing," he said. "It's the most important part. Breathe through your nose and deeply, make full use of your lungs, and fill them from the bottom up, using your diaphragm."

Again, Clancy demonstrated and Laas was quickly able to follow his example.

"As you breathe in, I want you to focus your mind on yourself. On everything that has been bothering you over the years, think about the pain and the hurt you have been feeling. Accept that it is part of you, part of who you are."

She did her best to do just that, to visualize Gene Edison and what he had meant to her, and the terrible pain she had felt, a pain so powerful it had been difficult to breathe when he had died on an insignificant rock of a planet in the middle of nowhere. And not just pain but also anger. Anger at herself for having been unable to save him, and anger at the shapeshifter who had delivered the killing strike but also anger at him for having jumped in its way to shield her and taking the lethal blow that had been meant for her.

"Imagine the air you are taking in acting as a healing light and allow it to fill your entire body, from your head too deep down to your toes. As you breathe out, I want you to visualize all that pain escaping your body alongside it."

And so she did. She let it all go, let it escape out of her nose as if it was nothing more than a vapor, hot air that had infected her body and could be gotten rid of as easily as exhaling.

"Continue to breathe," he said, "and continue to focus on your breathing and your life, your thoughts, and the pain and anger inside of you as it slips out of your body for good."

But Laas struggled to keep her thoughts that focused. And it wasn't the posture that gave her a hard time, certainly not the breathing, or the pleasant-smelling air and the calm surroundings. Her mind simply refused to cooperate. The pain she thought she was exhaling, felt as if she was simply taking it back inside herself with the next inhale. It seemed impossible not to think of the emptiness Gene's death had left inside of her and even worse, the blame over his death that had stayed with her ever since that fateful day.

She had been responsible for his death and as a result, she had sabotaged her own life and happiness. She had allowed his slaughter and by doing so she had not only let him down, she had let down everyone else who had counted on her to keep him safe, everyone who had known and loved him.

After just a couple of minutes, she uttered a heavy sigh and stood up again. "This isn't working."

Clancy looked up at her. "You have to give it a chance, Laas."

But she shook her head. "I'm trying, I really am, but this just isn't me," she said and looked around the temple. "Don't get me wrong, this is all very beautiful and I get how it is supposed to have a calming effect on me but in reality, none of this means anything to me. And I can't just will myself to feel better about myself. I'm not built that way."

Clancy stood as well. "I told you, this isn't some sort of magic cure. You cannot expect immediate results. You're on a journey, Laas. We're just taking a very small, first step."

"I know what you're trying to do, and I'm thankful for it but this is never going to work," she said, looking him right into the eye. "I just cannot do this, I'm sorry." And with that, she picked up her jacket, turned her back, and left the holographic temple behind.

\* \* \*

She found a message from Alex Clancy waiting for her on her computer terminal the next morning after she had woken up.

*Laas, I'm sorry I cannot speak to you today as I have been asked to join a conference on the starbase on short notice. I suppose you were right and meditation may not be the right choice for you after all. However, I did mention a journey and I am hoping you would give me one more chance at helping you with it. If you are willing to take up this challenge, I have provided some instructions on an expedition of a different kind with this message. It will not be easy, and it will require both effort and persistence from you, but I think you just might find what you've been looking for once you reach your destination.*

She couldn't deny that she wasn't at least somewhat intrigued by the message as well as the directions he had left for her. And while she was still certain that the holodeck session of the previous day, even though meant well by Clancy, had not had the intended effect on her, she was willing to give him another chance. She owed it to him to at least try, but probably even more so, she owed it to herself.

She also quickly realized that he had not exaggerated when he had claimed that she needed to be persistent. While the notes were a little on the vague side, it was obvious that what he had proposed was not just a journey in the figurative sense, but in fact, an actual trip that would keep her busy for at least the next week.

Laas smiled to herself. Clancy knew her better than she would have given him credit for. She was not a person to easily back down from a challenge.

She packed lightly, considering her destination, did some research on the likely weather she would encounter, and dressed accordingly. Then, after ensuring everything else onboard was squared away and could wait a few days until her return, she sat out via shuttle toward the starting point of this journey Clancy had put together for her and that he believed would help her in some way or form she still wasn't quite able to perceive.

It didn't matter. She had decided to see this through to the end.

She landed the shuttle in a city called La Paz in the Andes highlands of South America and inside a nation-state known as Bolivia. She had never been to this part of Earth before, but then, of course, she had never traveled the planet extensively even while she had been at the Academy. She had been too busy working hard on

the academic side of her studies which she had struggled with mightily after having spent almost her entire youth as an independence fighter on Bajor.

La Paz was a bustling city and it took her a while to get her bearings. Clancy's instructions had her traveling north via one of Earth's most ancient forms of transportation; an old-fashioned train guided along on metal tracks and apparently still in use in favor of more contemporary, high-speed vehicles. Judging from the type of passengers she encountered on the train, it was mostly tourists who chose to travel in this manner.

She exchanged the train for a boat once she reached Lake Titicaca, which she learned was not only the largest lake on the continent but one of the highest on the entire planet as far as surface elevation was concerned.

Laas had never been a big fan of boats, harboring a somewhat irrational fear of the ocean, but while Titicaca was a sprawling body of water, she was somewhat appeased by the fact that it was nothing more than a very large lake.

Once she had crossed it lengthwise, she nevertheless found herself relieved to be back on dry land as she continued to travel further north and into Peru. She found herself mesmerized by the beauty and diversity of the region that in some areas reminded her of the mountains of Rakantha province where she had grown up.

The flora and fauna, of course, were very different and she was particularly fascinated by a flock of peculiar-looking birds she encountered wadding through a shallow lake. They stood on two very long legs, even though they seemed to prefer just balancing on one at a time, had bright pink plumage and very long S-shaped necks that seemed to come in handy to bend all the way down into the water and find their meal. It was by far one of the oddest creatures she had ever seen and yet also an undeniably graceful one.

Laas eventually reached a clearly ancient town by the name of Cusco located in a valley she learned had once been the center of an advanced civilization that had long since disappeared.

Had she visited this place for sightseeing, she thought she could have easily spent days exploring the many historic locations the city had to offer. Instead, she continued higher and deeper into the mountains, this time making use of an even older type of train,

this one pulled by an ancient-looking and steam-powered locomotive.

Realizing that her journey would take her close to one of the great wonders of Earth history, Clancy had made allowances in his instructions for a visit to Machu Picchu, the ruins of an Incan citadel built on the very top of a steep mountain, rising over two thousand meters above sea level.

Laas was not deterred by the steep hike up to the peak even if it had been some years since she had last attempted such a trek—they had been commonplace fighting a guerilla war against the Cardassians when she had been but a child—and thanks to her role as security chief she kept herself in prime physical condition, which usually meant starting each day running multiple laps around *Eagle's* saucer section.

The ruins were indeed a sight to behold, and even more so were the stunning views from the mountaintop and the partially cloud-shrouded peaks all around her. She had heard of this place before, seen pictures of it, but she quickly found that they paled in comparison to the real thing.

The site was clearly a popular destination for both human and alien tourists and she didn't spend too much time there, but she didn't move on without promising herself to return someday to tour the ruins properly.

She left the tourists behind as she continued to travel even further north as to Clancy's directions. She followed ancient winding trails down the mountain and then up again, many of which looked as if they hadn't seen much use in centuries and required her to exercise great focus on caution to avoid an errant step that could have led to her tumbling down the mountain. This, after all, wasn't the holodeck, there weren't any safety protocols in place here other than her judgment.

She got lost a few times in this unfamiliar world, relying heavily on her travel padd to get her back on track, a handy tool that easily located her position but refused to tell her exactly what she would find at the end of this excursion.

On several occasions, she was forced to use her rock-climbing gear as she had to traverse otherwise impassable terrain. She slept in a tent for three consecutive nights without encountering another soul

save for wild llamas, many kinds of birds, including large and mighty-looking condors, soaring in the blue skies above and a close run-in with a cougar who had clearly not been happy about sharing his hunting grounds with this two-legged outsider. Thankfully the encounter had not led to violence, since Laas had not packed a phaser since it was generally frowned upon for visitors to Earth to arrive armed.

She sustained herself by eating Starfleet ration packs which she didn't mind at all and had gotten quite used to during her stint as a marine and in fact, had seemed like a lavish meal compared to the scraps she'd scrounged together for food in her former life. She also had to endure some difficult weather conditions during her trek, including a couple of rainstorms that had forced her to seek shelter in her sturdy tent for hours at a time.

It wasn't until her third night that she had considered how much she was actually enjoying herself. Not just exploring this wild and beautiful land, the unfamiliar flora and fauna she encountered daily, but also the way she was entirely focused on the trek itself, on the challenging terrain, on where to set up camp and when to seek shelter, and on relying mostly on her wits and abilities instead of on the technology she usually depended on daily. It also felt somewhat liberating to be doing all this by herself for a change, with nobody else around to assist her.

It was a life-affirming experience that kept her totally engaged in her own survival, and only much later did she realize that during the majority of her journey she had hardly thought at all about her duties back on *Eagle*, the war she had helped fight or the people she had lost.

She was beginning to think that perhaps Clancy had sent her onto this journey not so much to reach a destination but perhaps for the journey itself. That was until her fourth day in the wild and after climbing the steepest and trickiest rock wall yet—one that had caused her to slip and nearly plummet to her death at least a couple of times—that she realized that there had been some other purpose to all this after all.

After a challenging ascent, she pulled herself up to discover an expansive mountain plateau that unsurprisingly featured yet another, smaller range in the near distance. But differently to most others, she

had encountered over the last few days, she actually spotted the first signs of human habitation since she had left Machu Picchu behind.

She was able to make out more details of the settlement built into the mountain as she began to cross the plateau. It looked very much like an old-fashioned village, too small to be called a town, with high walls, just a handful of buildings, and a central structure, not unlike a keep complete with tall towers. But what struck her most of all was how familiar it all looked. She couldn't immediately place it, not until she got closer and she was able to spot more details of those domed spires.

Laas felt her heart beat faster as she realized that the architectural style was unmistakable. It wasn't an Earth-style. It was Bajoran.

It was a vedek temple.

Both excited and fascinated, she picked up the pace, crossing the plateau and then hiking up a path toward the village until she reached the gates. Any final doubts of what she had found were quickly dispelled when she encountered the Bajoran signs that identified this place as a Bajoran vedek retreat built nearly forty years ago by Bajoran exiles who had escaped the homeworld during the Cardassian occupation.

She wasn't surprised that she had never heard of this place, after all, she had never put much effort into connecting with her people after arriving on Earth and certainly not in any kind of spiritual way, and yet she was completely awestruck by discovering a little bit of her homeworld on this planet so very far away.

As she passed the walls she felt as if she had been transported back to Bajor. She had never had much use for religion, even as a child, but she had visited temples on a few occasions and what she found here looked almost exactly the way she remembered it, including a beautifully manicured and serene garden. She spotted at least half a dozen Bajorans wearing bright orange vedek robes, meditating or tending to this oasis.

She dropped her backpack and for a moment simply stared, taking it all in, surprised not just by what she had found but also by the feelings suddenly washing over her. It was a sense of euphoria she couldn't fully comprehend.

One of the vedeks spotted her, an older man with a thick white beard, and walked over to her. "Welcome," he said and smiled at her. "We have been expecting you."

She simply nodded; her words stuck in her throat.

The vedek reached out for her ear the same way she remembered vedeks do when she had been a child and something she had always found rather vexing.

She felt none of that now, instead, she welcomed the touch, as well as the vedek's complete disregard of the fact that she wasn't wearing the traditional earring that signified a Bajoran's faith and her decision not to wear it which had often irked other Bajorans, particularly vedeks.

But this man simply continued to smile at her. "The prophets have guided you to us, Nora Laas. Are you ready to embrace their love?"

She had been asked this question many times before on Bajor and her answer had always been the same. Her primary concern had always been fighting and killing Cardassians, not praying to some sort of abstract gods living in a temple in the sky who seemingly had no tangible interest in helping the Bajoran people fight off their oppressors. Faith, as far as she had been concerned, had been the refuge of the weak and those who weren't able to fight using a real weapon.

And yet, at that moment, many light-years from the place she had been born and where she had grown up, many years after she had left that world behind her, she thought she could feel the one thing that had eluded her all this time.

She thought she could feel the love of the prophets.

Nora Laas smiled.

# The Audacity of Youth

Back Then

2314

Elijah Katanga was absolutely convinced that he had hit the jackpot when he had chosen the relatively unknown world of Yura II as the shore leave destination for himself and his close friend Dezwin Sigus.

After all, who could argue with the marvelous azure, cloudless skies, the pleasantly warm weather—just a little bit on the hot side—and the mild and refreshing breeze. And then, of course, there were the seemingly endless, sandy beaches with the water just as blue as the sky above.

More importantly, perhaps were the people. Even though they were not used to many alien visitors, after having endured a dictatorial and xenophobic regime for the better part of half a century, that had only recently been disposed of following a long and bloody civil war.

None of this was obvious from the welcoming manner Eli, Dez, and a small group of other off-world visitors had been received by not just the officials looking after the local region they had chosen for their shore leave but also by everyone else they had come in contact with from the shop vendors, the waiting staff in the restaurants and the hotel to the random people they encountered on the streets.

“According to this, Yura II was ruled by the Kindred, a religious minority with control over the military. The Kindred were able to maintain a kleptocracy for over two hundred years. Practically the entire planet was in a state of civil war for the last twenty years or so. The war came to an end only five years ago when the rebel forces took control of the government.

Since then, the transitional leadership has invited foreign delegates to help reshape their government, which is currently modeled after a technocracy with the formerly repressed technical elite in power. According to Federation guidelines, all visiting Starfleet personnel is strongly advised not to interfere with any

political activity or otherwise get involved in strictly internal affairs as defined by the Prime Directive or face disciplinary action.

Reading this, I don't know if coming here was such a great idea considering this planet's turbulent, recent history. We could have gone to Trill for shore leave. That's a world a lot less complicated," Dezwin said without once looking up from his padd.

Eli rolled his eyes, having grown tired of Dez reading from the padd he had brought to the beach while they were lying next to each other on two comfortable deck chairs. "Every time we go back to Trill we spend half our time helping your parents on their farm. That's not what I call shore leave."

"I always found a bit of manual labor quite cathartic. Besides, it's fun to operate all that heavy machinery. And there is more than enough time to check out all the great sights on weekends."

Eli reached over to him and with two fingers slowly pushed the padd downward. "There are plenty of great sights right here."

"Hey, I was reading—"

That's as far as Dez got until he spotted the two pretty young women who stood directly in their line of sight, in ankle-deep water, wearing revealing swimwear and watching the two offworlders with amused giggles.

"What does your padd say about the locals?"

"Friendly," he said without having to double-check and giving the two women a beaming grin. "Very, very friendly."

"I think we should put that to a test," said Eli and jumped out of his chair to head towards the two women.

"Never could say no to you," said Dez and promptly followed.

It turned out the two women, Melna and Derla, were indeed extremely friendly and curious about Eli and Dez, intrigued by the human's dark skin and the Trill's leopard-like spots. And while the Yurians were humanoid and a fairly close anatomical match to both humans and Trill, dark skin and body markings were uncommon on their world.

The two pairs quickly connected, Melna and Derla just as happy to talk to the two alien visitors about their world as Eli and Dez were to answer questions about the Federation and the galaxy beyond Yura II. They spent most of the morning and afternoon together, first on the beach, then exploring nearby caves, until they

found themselves in a local eatery in the later afternoon where the two young women introduced them to the strange and exciting, new cuisine.

"So you're both doctors?" Melna asked over dessert as the conversation had drifted to their respective occupations.

"Not exactly," said Eli. "Dez here is training to become a doctor. I'm just a lowly corpsman."

"With high ambitions," the Trill quickly added. "Still thinking about nurse training, aren't you?"

He just shrugged. "Maybe. We'll see."

"Such a noble profession. Being a doctor, a nurse, or just any occupation where you are helping people," said Derla

"Don't be fooled," said Eli with a smirk. "Dez here has been putting off taking his final medical admissions test for two years now. Some days I think he's only studying to be a doctor so he can try and impress women."

"Hey," Dez protested, "those tests are not easy, one needs to be prepared. Just because you've done yours already doesn't give you the right to throw this into my face."

Melna sidled up closer to the Trill sitting next to her, a wicked smile on her full lips. "Well, if the plan was to meet women, it seems to have worked."

He reciprocated the smile with one of his own. "It does help."

"That and being from another planet," said Derla who clearly had taken a liking to Elijah.

Dez nodded. "And it would be a shame to end our joint, interspecies exploration so early. The night is still young. What's up next? A walk on the beach under the moonlight?"

"Moonlights," corrected Eli, referring to the three moons already visible in the darkening sky.

"Whatever you have in mind," said Derla and stood, "I'm afraid it will have to be without me. At least tonight."

"Say it ain't so?" said Eli, clearly disappointed by her departure. "Is it something I said?"

She quickly shook her head. "Not at all. And I'm still eager to learn more about your Federation. But it's my turn to look after my father tonight, I'm afraid."

"Is he not well?" said Dez.

She shook her head sadly. "They say he's got the Crimson Flu."

"Oh no," said Melna quickly. "I'm so sorry. Is he on the list?"

Derla nodded slowly. "Yes, but not very high. We don't think he's going to hold out," she forced a smile onto her lips. "I'm sorry, I wouldn't be very good company tonight either way. It was a pleasure to meet you both and I hope we will see each other again. Have a good evening all."

And with that she quickly left the restaurant, leaving the others behind.

Dez, his medical curiosity piqued, turned to the friend she had left behind. "What is this Crimson Flu?"

"I'm not entirely certain. It's a disease that's been around for a long time, I think. It's gotten worse over the last few years."

"But there is a cure?" asked Eli.

She nodded. "Yes, but it is rare and strictly rationed. If you have the Crimson Flu you go on a list. But unless you're part of the Technologist sect, your chances aren't very good. They are even worse if you are a former Kindred like Derla's family. It's not fair, they never even supported the government during the war, but now they are being punished just by association."

"Not just unfair," said Eli, "sounds outright criminal if you ask me."

"Maybe," said Dez, "but keep in mind this is a different culture and we know very little about it"

But Eli shook his head. "Fair is fair, here or anywhere else. And this isn't."

"We thought it would be different after the war with the old regime gone," said Derla. "But sometimes it feels nothing has changed except the names of the people who make the rules."

"Sounds about right," said Dez.

"How can you say that?" Eli protested. "Nothing about this is right."

"I know that. I just mean that I have heard about this kind of thing before. In a lot of places. After a big war, the common people are the last ones to ever benefit," said the Trill.

"And in the meantime, they are left to die?"

"As much as I enjoy a philosophical discussion, particularly one about my own people, from the perspective of outsiders, no less, I

think I really should go and look after Melna. Help her any way I can."

As she stood, Eli and Dez quickly followed suit.

"Please, accept my apologies. I didn't mean to be judgmental," Eli said quickly after realizing he might have been at fault for her decision to leave.

"No, that's fine. And for what it's worth, I do believe you are correct about what you're saying about our ways. We should catch up again soon and before you leave. Thank you for a wonderful day."

"The pleasure was ours," said Dez before she too left them behind.

The two of them sat back down and remained silent for a moment until Eli stood suddenly and walked off with a determined pace.

"I don't think I like that look on your face," said Dez and then followed him outside. It turned out that his friend was making a beeline back to their hotel room and by the time he had caught up with him, he found Eli already sitting in front of their desk and the computer terminal that had been provided for their use.

"What are you doing?"

He didn't speak straight away, too preoccupied with trying to figure out how this alien technology worked. But it wasn't long until he found what he had been looking for. "They have a publicly accessible information network here. Just wondering what they may have on this Crimson Flu."

"Where are you going with this, Eli?" Dez asked, unable to mask the suspicion in his voice as he looked over his friend's shoulder.

"We are medical professionals. At least one of us is trying to become one," he added. "I think as such we should research a potential viral epidemic on the very same planet we're currently staying on."

"Right," said Dez, sounding unconvinced.

"Here we go," said Eli once he had found what he was looking for, searching through the publicly available records. "The Crimson Flu is apparently caused by a negative-sense, single-stranded, segmented RNA virus that causes mild to severe influenza symptoms

with a fifteen to twenty percent fatality rate with elderly persons most at risk."

"Okay, that sounds a lot like a type-A influenza virus. Very common on most worlds with large humanoid populations. The fatality rate is high though."

"Well, listen to this. Apparently, an antiviral inhibitor is available for treatment but the distribution of the drug is strictly controlled, and waiting times to receive the medication can be from six months to two years."

Dez moved closer to the screen. "Six months? That is way too long for an influenza virus-like this."

"Yes, it is. If untreated, the Crimson Flu virus can become terminal after three weeks of exposure. These records are not very clear but since this outbreak, it seems more than twenty million people have died from the Crimson Flu."

"That's a full-blown pandemic. At least class six," said Dez as he glanced over the screen and tried to make sense of the translated text there. "Maybe even class seven. Is there even a class seven?"

"I don't know but if there wasn't before, there is one now. Right here on this planet."

Dez sat down on his bed. "How did something like this not make it on our official Starfleet brief?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if the Yurian government has been keeping this piece of information from the Federation. It also looks as if this region doesn't appear as badly affected as some of the larger population centers on the northern hemisphere."

But the Trill shook his head. "Hardly an excuse."

"None at all as far as I'm concerned," Eli said, doing little to hide his outrage. "And the fact that the government is doing nothing about this virus, hoarding the antiviral agents for themselves and their supporters instead of making it available to everyone infected makes this nothing short of genocide."

"That's a strong word."

"It's what's going on here," said Eli and stood, walking over to his large duffel bag and after rummaging through it for a moment pulled out a hand-held, gray device.

"You brought a tricorder on shore leave?"

Eli shrugged his shoulders. "You never know when it may come in handy," he said as he began to manipulate its controls, the top section popping out and the device beginning to hum and blink. "The antiviral agents won't be hard to find, they are based on protein inhibitors, something a medical tricorder should be able to pick up easily, and—here we go. Found a large concentration just three kilometers from our location."

"So what? You want to go and break into a medical store like some sort of drug addict and steal a whole bunch of medication? Have you taken leave of your senses? Who does something like that? Remember the Starfleet guidelines. Particularly the parts about the non-interference."

"I'm not saying we're going to steal anything. I'm just going to have a look at what they are doing with these drugs. Dez, they're purposefully withholding medication to their own populace. You can't tell me that you can sleep easy tonight knowing that people all around you are suffering because they are being denied the very treatment they need to survive. The least we can do is get somebody to explain to us the reasoning behind this. I'm going and that's that. Up to you what you're going to do." Eli slung the tricorder over his shoulder and headed for the doors.

Dez watched them close behind him and then uttered a heavy sigh before he got up and slowly followed his friend. "I already know I'm going to regret this."

## Now

Tazla Star leaned back in the guest chair inside the CMO's office and scrolled through a padd. "Looks like all medical supplies are fully restocked, all facilities checked and operational and the latest crew rotations confirmed," she said and then peeked over the padd to look at Elijah Katanga sitting behind his desk with his concentration focused on his computer terminal. "You have exactly zero patients, as to be expected while docked at a starbase containing the largest

hospital in the quadrant, and none of your research requires any personal supervision at this point."

The doctor simply mumbled an undecipherable response.

"That then begs the question as to why you're still on board when the ship is almost deserted with the vast majority of the crew enjoying their greatly deserved shore leave."

"Huh?" Katanga said but didn't seem to pay attention to any of her words.

"Why are you not down on Earth?" Star said more forcefully.

Elijah, startled by her tone, turned to look at her. "Why aren't you?"

"Don't deflect. Besides I'm due to join the captain on his diving expedition in Australia tomorrow."

"Right," he said with a smirk. "You and the captain. Looks like you're getting all chummy, spending your shore leave together. You sure have come a long way from the days I first got here when you could barely stand the man."

Tazla quickly shook her head as she took her boots off the desk. "That's not fair. I mean, yes, we're much closer now but I never disliked Owens. If anything, I've been incredibly grateful for everything he's done for me."

"Oh please, from what you've told me he had no choice in keeping you on. And for the first year or so you were a first officer in name only the way he kept you on his leash."

She nodded slowly, thoughtfully. "There were... trust issues. But I don't blame him for that. I had some baggage. Still do."

"Whatever you say. At least he finally sees your true value."

She offered him a wide, almost overdone smile. "It's just so touching the way you look out for me. I remember a time when things were the other way around."

Eli uttered a little laugh to that. "You, looking out for me? When was that ever the case?"

"I can think of a few instances when you would have gone off the rails if it hadn't been for my calming and reasonable influence. In fact, I wanted to speak to you about one of those times."

He shot her a quizzical expression.

"Yura II."

"Must we?" he said with a groan. "That was a million years ago."

"Close. Sixty-two."

"That's a lifetime."

She shot him a sweet smile. "Yes, but see for us joined Trill one lifetime is actually not such a big deal."

"Lucky you," he said. "Still, the less said about Yura II the better. Hell, I hardly even remember most of it."

Tazla became more serious as she sat up straighter in her chair. "I don't think we don't have much of a choice in the matter. The captain spoke to me about this earlier this morning. It appears that some important mining rights are due to expire and the Federation really cannot afford to lose these to another bidder right now. Apparently, the Yura system possesses dense gallicite deposits that are critical for the Starfleet rebuilding effort."

"What does any of this have to do with us?"

Tazla hesitated for a moment, trying to find the best words for what she needed to say next. "Certain influential persons on Yura II appear to have better memories than you do. They remember our visit there quite well and will not agree to re-sign the treaty until certain concessions have been made."

He fixed her with a dark scowl. "What kind of concessions?"

"An apology."

He looked dumbstruck. "An apology for something that happened over sixty years ago that most people—who are not Trill—have long since forgotten? This is ridiculous."

"I completely agree."

"Good," he said and then turned back to look at his terminal as if this had put the matter to bed.

Unfortunately, Taz knew better. "They expect us to issue a formal apology for our actions," she said after he hadn't said anything further on this. She stood from her chair. "Seeing that you don't recall any of the details, I figured I just draft something for the both of us. I'll let you have a quick look at it when I'm done."

"Wait a minute," he said before she could slip out of the door. "I didn't agree to issue any kind of apology."

"Look, this is nothing more than silly political posturing by an old man who holds a grudge. We're both above these kinds of things."

Let's just hammer something out quickly, get it issued and everyone's happy."

"I'm not happy," he said with an exasperated sigh. "Who put you up to this? It's Owens, isn't it?"

She shrugged. "Honestly, it's not a big deal."

"Yes, yes it is, Dez," he said, calling her by the name of her former host as he was sometimes wont to do. "What we did back then, it was the right thing. We were right and they were wrong. I'm not going to apologize for being right."

"I thought you didn't remember."

"It's coming back to me now," he said. "And I stand by my actions. All of them. If you want to apologize for yours, that's fine, but I encourage you to stand by your principles, I know I will. And I won't compromise them to satisfy a starship captain who wasn't even alive back when all this took place."

"It's not just that, Eli."

"Really? What then if not to ingratiate yourself further with that man? I bet you didn't even bat an eyelash when he asked you to do this. He probably mentioned this offhand and you just agreed, not considering for even a moment that what we did back then made a difference for a lot of people. That it was the right thing to do and if we were placed in that exact same position once more, we wouldn't hesitate to make the same choices all over again."

Tazla hesitated for a moment when she realized the truth of his words. At least as far as how Captain Owens had approached her about the apology that had been demanded from her and from Elijah Katanga. And he was also correct that she hadn't thought much about it at the time. Maybe he was right, after all, maybe she had been too eager to please her captain to even consider turning down the request.

He carried on as if he knew exactly what she was thinking.  
"Don't compromise your own ethics just to humor others, Taz. If there is one thing I've learned over the many years practicing medicine, this is it. And you know who taught me that? A very good friend of mine," he said and pointed at her stomach where he knew her slug-like symbiont lived. "Why don't you go ask him to see what he would do?"

## Back Then

With the help of his tricorder, Elijah had been able to track down a surprisingly large stockpile of antiviral medications and other drugs to a warehouse located not very far from the hotel, but on Dez's insistence, they had detoured to the seat of the local government instead, seeing what they could glean from the officials in charge of thesees seemingly disastrous policies that exposed a large swath of the population to fend for their own against a deadly virus for which a cure seemed to exist.

The administrators they encountered were more than happy to meet with two representatives of the Federation, and were courteous and helpful, at least so far as to get them seen by somebody who had some real influence.

That somebody was a man called Horas Rah, currently serving as the chief alderman of the local province they were staying in.

"I've read about Rah," said Dez quietly as they were being led toward his office. "He was one of the leaders of the rebellion against the government, practically a folk hero amongst the people. Probably just the man we need to talk to about this."

"If he was so important, how come they put him in charge of a small seaside province half a world removed from the center of this planet's power?" Eli asked.

Dez had no response to this but the answer to this mystery became a little more apparent when they stepped into what looked like a workshop of sorts—not an office, as they had expected—and came face-to-face with Horas Rah.

His most obvious feature was his youth. Handsome, by human standards, tall, square-jawed but also unlikely to be a year older than Eli. If he had indeed been a hero in this world's revolution, it hadn't been for long, which of course also must have meant that he had distinguished himself from an early age, and doing so very rapidly. Dez didn't miss a certain intelligence in his bright, green eyes.

He was also clearly a hands-on kind of a leader, his sleeves rolled up, he was working along with other men and women on a

large device of sorts, outfitted with numerous pipes and what looked like pumps and cylinders.

"Mister Katanga, Mister Sigus, welcome, welcome," he said with a beaming smile as he turned to his guests. "We are very much honored that you have come to our world, and this very province to enjoy all we have on offer."

"You have a beautiful world and a great province here," said Dez, "great people too from what we've seen."

He nodded with a certain pride. "I am glad that you have been enjoying your stay here and I would very much like to take the opportunity to talk to you in a more ... appropriate setting about your stay," he said. "We're all a little busy working on our latest project here but I'm sure I can take a few minutes to speak to you," he added, pointing at the machine behind him that was still being tended to by a small army of workers and engineers.

"What is it?" Eli asked with curiosity.

He beamed, obviously proud of his accomplishment, as he turned to look at it. "This is a prototype desalination device. We are hoping to build dozens of these and place them near the ocean to provide fresh drinking water to most of the province." He turned back to his guests, allowing them a moment to look over the machine. "If you'd like to follow me, there is an area nearby where we can talk in private." Rah led the two off-worlders out of a workshop and into a currently empty rest area with tables and chairs. He poured each of them cups of water and handed them out. "Here, please have a taste."

Dez took a sip with Eli watching and when he didn't immediately keel over dead, he followed suit.

Dez nodded. "Very refreshing."

"Yes," he said, "you may even taste the faint hint of the added minerals the prototype infuses into the end product to fortify the immune system and general health and well-being."

"I'm relieved to hear that you're so concerned about your people's health seeing how that is the reason we've come to see you," said Dez.

"Is that so?"

Dez nodded. "We have encountered a few people who have been indirectly affected by the Crimson Flu and since we're both working in the medical field, this has piqued our interest."

"We're somewhat surprised that visitors haven't been made aware of this health issue beforehand," interrupted Eli, "considering it is a serious pandemic affecting a significant percentage of the population."

Horas Rah nodded slowly, his facial expression pained. "Very sadly so. But let me assure you that as long as you stay within this immediate area, you are completely safe."

"That's not actually why we're concerned, Alderman," said Dez. "We understand that there is a vaccine available. One with a very high rate of effectiveness, even to already infected patients. But it is not being made available publicly."

Ras turned his back to the two men for a moment.

"Is this true?" Eli practically demanded.

"I would be lying to you if I told you it wasn't," he said, still not facing them directly.

"People are dying out there," Eli said, doing little to hide the frustration he felt over this. "And from what we have learned, it is even more difficult to obtain the vaccine if the infected person is associated with a certain religious group or if their standing in society is not high enough."

Rah very slowly turned back around. "You must understand, these are difficult times for all of us. We have just emerged from a century of oppression by a government whose primary purpose was to enrich itself and a few selected individuals but cared little about the common good of the people. We fought long and hard to bring about change and it cost us dearly. Not just in those who gave their lives for the cause but also in vital infrastructure and technology. Many of the most basic systems to ensure our people's welfare was destroyed when the government realized it was about to lose control and adopted a scorched earth policy. They wanted to make sure that when they were gone, we had to start over from scratch.

That is the unfortunate reality of the situation we find ourselves in and it means that we all have to make sacrifices while we slowly but surely rebuild our broken world."

Eli looked at the man as if he had spontaneously grown a second head. "So what? You're saying this is sanctioned policy? That you're content with withholding life-saving medicine to the people?"

Rah quickly shook his head. "Of course, I am not content with this. My heart bleeds for every single Yuran who succumbs to the Crimson Flu and many of my fellow colleagues feel the same way."

Dezwin exchanged a quizzical look with his friend before he considered the young official. "I am not sure I understand. You claim that you don't like this policy, that most in your new government doesn't, and yet you withhold the vaccine to those who need it the most. Why?"

"Despite what some would have you believe, our supply of the vaccine is not limitless and its production is difficult. It must be strictly rationed. The Crimson Flu is a disease affecting this entire planet, not just my province."

Eli nodded. "I can understand that. What I don't understand is why you make it so difficult for people who are in dire need of it to obtain it. Why are certain segments of the population considered less favorably when rationing the cure?"

Horas Rah looked at the two men as if the answer to Elijah's question was inherently obvious. "First and foremost we must secure the long-term survival of our people and our society as a whole. In these difficult times, we cannot afford to consider the well-being of individuals. Our priority must be the entirety of the Yuran people. As such the vaccine must be made available to those members of the society who play the greatest role in securing its future. That means our architects, our engineers, our scientists, our policy shapers, and our peace officers. All those people without which our society would collapse."

Elijah Katanga's dark face noticeably reddened at hearing this. "And everyone who doesn't fall into the category you have deemed to be vital to your society is considered expendable, is that it?"

"Expendable?" he said and then shook his head. "No. But certainly less valuable. And trust me some of the people who occupy the halls of planetary power have even more extreme views on this matter with which I strongly disagree. It is one of the reasons why I am working very hard to improve my own station and to one day be in a position to affect real change in planet-wide policy myself. I want

to make sure Yura will one day be able to make a significant contribution to the intergalactic community and take its place among the many societies in the the galaxy."

Eli couldn't believe his ears. "I'm not sure that you'll make it very far with those kinds of beliefs. And if you don't consider your current system extreme already, God help the people of this world once those other folks you mentioned get their way."

"How is any of this better than what your old regime practiced?" asked Dezwin. "From everything you've told us, all you've done is replace one form of government tyranny for another. What was the point of this war if in the end, only a select few prosper?"

Rah looked downright disappointed. "I see you still do not understand that we are trying to secure a better future for all our people."

"Oh, we understand all right," said Eli with obvious disdain. "It's a great new future you're all working towards. Except for those thousands, probably millions of people you left behind on the way and who will never get the chance to see it because somebody in power decided that they were not important enough to save."

"I don't expect you to understand what my people have been through over the last hundred years or so. I don't expect you to like what we are forced to do to heal as a people but I do expect you to respect our ways and leave your moral judgments and politics back in the Federation where everything is handed to you on a golden platter and where struggling for survival is a purely intellectual concept." Rah's tone had taken a harder edge now. "Don't presume that the two of you can come here and judge my entire people because the way we have decided to run our world offends your sensibilities.

Nobody made you come here, you've chosen to visit this world for our great hospitality and its natural beauty. If you cannot enjoy it without restraining your moral outrage and self-righteous indignation, I am more than happy to arrange transport to take you back to your precious Federation."

"I just want to be clear about one thing," said Eli. "You were considered a hero among your people during the war, is that right?

The very same people who trusted you to bring real change to this world."

"And we did," he said angrily. "And part of that change is to make difficult decisions others are unable to do. To decide whose life is more valuable than somebody else's and act accordingly. For the common good of all of Yura."

Eli nodded slowly as if the truth had finally sunken in. "I know of quite a few so-called leaders on my world who used a very similar argument to justify very similar decisions. For what it's worth, for the common good of all of Yura, I sincerely hope that you'll never be in a position to lead anything more significant than this province. And should this world be unfortunate enough for you to succeed in becoming its leader, the lesson I would impart on you from the history of my own world is simply this: Those people I mentioned you remind me of, it never ended well for them."

Rah just stared at the human with a blank expression.  
"I think you're right, Alderman," added Dezwin. "I think perhaps it was a mistake for us coming here. And as long as you continue to propagate these self-destructive policies, we'll be doing everything we can to convince anyone else in the Federation to book their vacations elsewhere." He continued before Rah could respond.  
"Don't worry about showing us out, we know the way. Have a nice life." With that Dezwin grabbed Eli's arm and pulled him along as he made a beeline for the doors. Of course, his friend offered little resistance, just as eager to put as much distance between him and this so-called hero as possible.

"What a totally insufferable jerk," Eli said once they had left the building and then stopped to look at his friend. "I can honestly not believe half the things this fool was blabbering about. In fact, I think it made me physically ill just listening to that man talk."

"You and me both."

Eli considered him carefully. "Well, we did what you suggested and we talked to the powers that be, for all the good that did. Now what?"

"Now?" the Trill said. "We go find that warehouse where they keep that vaccine."

## Now

She took a deep breath of fresh ocean air, once more surprised how much more invigorating it was compared to the atmosphere she breathed in daily onboard a starship. Like many Starfleet officers, she had simply gotten so used to it that the only time she truly noticed the difference was when she was faced with the real thing.

It was so much more remarkable when combined with her surroundings, the wide-open and colorful ocean and islands that made up the Great Barrier Reef. She had never been to this place before, and she wasn't quite sure why she had never made time for this during her academy years on Earth.

Then, of course, there were many things Tazla Star had never made time for, which was surprising perhaps considering her symbiont was over three hundred years old.

Standing at the bow of the small trawler as it gently glided across the calm sea, she found herself regretting some of the choices she had made that had kept her away from places like these.

"Enjoying the view?"

She turned to look at Michael Owens who had emerged from the pilothouse, like her, dressed in casual wear, a loose shirt, and shorts, very much befitting their surroundings. "Absolutely. I'm glad I decided to come along. Didn't realize what I was missing."

He nodded with a smirk. "It's only going to get better once we dive in."

"Shouldn't you be at the helm?" she said with a smirk.

"Auto-pilot. You mentioned you wanted to talk. We have some time until we get to Osprey Reef."

They sat down together on the deck, letting their feet dangle overboard and for a brief moment, Tazla felt like a child again, sitting on the dock of a lake she had frequented when she had been younger and dreaming of the stars, instead of sitting next to her commanding officer. She watched the azure-colored water rush by her bare feet.

"I've been thinking about the Yuran request."

"The apology they're demanding? I don't blame you; it's a rather silly and immature request. Childish really."

She smirked, looking up at him. "Maybe, but we weren't much older than children back when all this happened so perhaps it is appropriate."

"Yes, you were all much younger back then. But it was a long time ago and one would think you've all grown up and matured quite a bit since then. You and Elijah and certainly this Horas Rah who is so insistent that you issue an apology."

"It's odd," she said. "When I look back at it now and through the eyes of Star who has seen and experienced so much over its many lifetimes, it all feels so distant and inconsequential. Dezwin wasn't even joined with Star yet back then."

"And yet thanks to Star they have become your memories, too, haven't they?"

She nodded. "Yes, they have."

"I suppose you could always argue that Dezwin Sigus was a different person, certainly back then and before the joining. I'm sure you cannot be held accountable for what he did before he became one with the symbiont."

"Something tells me that Horas Rah doesn't care for that distinction. Besides, I am not the one to shirk away from responsibility or abandon my friends on the count of a technicality."

He offered her a smile. "No, I didn't think you were. It doesn't change the fact that this whole thing is nothing more than a private grudge by a clearly prideful man unable to let go of the past."

"You almost make it sound as if I shouldn't be going through with it?"

Michael Owens looked at the horizon for a moment before responding. "It's your decision, Taz. Yours and Katanga's. I can't order you to apologize for the mistakes of your youth. Hell, if I did, I'd have to issue a few dozen or so myself."

"But Starfleet wants this to happen?"

"I don't have to tell you that the Federation is not in the greatest shape," he said, even though one could have been forgiven to think otherwise judging purely by their current surroundings. "It will take us a long time to recover from this war, and several enemies and even allies are going to look to test and challenge us over the next few years. If you forgive the pun, the blood is in the water. And

as much as I hate to admit it, we will need trading partners like Yura II and the resources they can offer us now more than ever."

"You're getting a lot of pressure from Command over this, I take it?"

"Let's just say I had the pleasure to converse with enough politicians and senior officials on this matter over the last few days that will last me a lifetime."

Tazla considered that for a moment as she kept her eyes on the beautifully clear surface below where she was certain she could see entire schools of fish zigzagging across the reef.

He put a hand on her shoulder. "I know this isn't easy, Taz, and I'm not going to put you in a position to pressure you one way or the other. I've come to learn to trust your instincts. It took me a while to get there, but I'm confident enough to know that you'll make the right choice in the end."

She uttered a little laugh. "Not sure if that confidence is making this easier or harder on me."

He clasped her back good-naturedly. "We both knew being my XO wasn't going to be easy," he said and stood. "Now, come on, we're almost there. We need to change. And I can't think of a better way to get a fresh perspective on things than a good long dive."

## Back Then

The whole thing had been entirely coincidental and had certainly not been planned in any detail beforehand and much later when both Dezwin Sigus and Elijah Katanga had been formally deposed by officers working for Starfleet's Judge Advocate General, that had been exactly the testimony they had given. Of course, by that point, that fact had not been much of an excuse at all.

They had arrived outside the warehouse that Eli's tricorder had pinpointed as a location containing a significant amount of antiviral agents and had observed the oval-shaped building for hours, during which it became more and more apparent that the warehouse served as a major medical distribution center judging by the great amount of activity consisting of transport vehicles entering and leaving the facility.

Perhaps even more interesting was the fact that movement of the Crimson Flu remedy was particularly high; a great number of vehicles transporting this crucial agent were seemingly constantly on the move to destinations unknown.

Eli suspected — even though there was no way of knowing for sure — that their visit to Horas Rah had spurred this sudden redistribution of resources, perhaps in an effort to move it away from prying off-worlder eyes who had developed a sudden and unwelcome interest in the way the local government was handling this medical crisis.

Eli was also the first to notice the pattern each vehicle followed and the opportunity it allowed. Every single transporter, all of them large and heavy wheeled vehicles pulling long white trailers, rolled up to a checkpoint, stopped there, and with the engine left idling, the drivers and sole occupants left the vehicle to enter a nearby shack where they stayed for nearly two full minutes, possibly to complete paperwork or perhaps confirm their route.

When they finally reemerged, they quickly returned to their transporter, stepped back into the driving cab, and promptly drove off. During those couple of minutes, the vehicle seemed to be left entirely unattended with nothing at all standing between the unguarded vehicle and the main road.

“Do you have any idea how many Starfleet regulations we would be breaking?” Dez had said when Eli had suggested they take advantage of this obvious security loophole. “Not to mention local laws. I’m fairly certain they don’t look kindly on grand theft auto around these parts.”

“It’s obviously not a major concern considering how comfortable they are leaving a transport filled with medical drugs just standing there for minutes on end. I’m beginning to think they want somebody to come and take it off their hands,” he had countered. “Besides, I’m okay breaking a few laws if it means saving people’s lives.”

Dez had tried to think of a counterargument; after all, he had been the voice of reason so far, preaching restraint and reverence to alien cultural practices. And yet the idling vehicle simply standing there, less than fifteen meters away, just waiting to be taken, was too inviting a target.

So once they had confirmed the latest transport was indeed filled with large amounts of the antiviral agent, the two of them took off as soon as the driver had predictably left the vehicle and disappeared inside the checkpoint.

They found the doors to the driver's cab unlocked and they slipped inside with Dez sliding behind the main controls.

"Now what?" Dez asked as he looked over the various buttons and levers arranged around the pilot seat.

Eli shot him a disbelieving look. "I thought you could drive these kinds of things?"

The Trill shot his friend a blank stare. "What gave you that idea?"

"I don't know, maybe the fact that you constantly talk about helping out on your parent's farm back home? Operating the equipment."

"Well, I'm sorry but this looks nothing like the harvester that we have back on our farm," he said and glanced around the cockpit, trying to find something that looked familiar.

Eli activated the medical tricorder he had brought.

"This is not a patient to diagnose, Eli, this is a machine."

He waved him off. "It's all the same when you get down to it."

"No, it's not. This is entirely —"

Dez stopped in midsentence when Eli leaned over and pressed a button on the instrument panel that promptly activated the vehicle's engine and brought the entire console to life. He aimed a smug look in his direction. "You were saying?"

"Lucky guess."

Eli smirked. "That and it's the biggest, brightest button on the entire console."

A large display projected on the windshield gave helpful visual instructions on how to operate the vehicle, including which lever released the brakes, which one to use to engage the throttle as well as highlighting the control stick to determine the driving direction.

"It's just as I said, they want us to take this thing," Eli said as he watched the directions playing on the screen.

The driver who must have heard the engine of his own transport turning on came running out of the checkpoint building, shouting angrily.

Eli hit another button on the console that locked the doors to the cab and the driver began to angrily bang against the window when he was unable to open it.

The two hijackers looked at the upset Yuran for a moment. "Of all the crazy things we've ever done, I think this ranks at the top of the list," said Dez.

"Top three, at the very least," said Eli and then, ignoring the furious driver, turned back to look at Dez. "You know, it's not too late to call this off. I'm sure we could still get away with calling this a cultural misunderstanding."

He considered that for a moment, shooting one last look at the man outside insisting that they opened the doors before letting his eyes wander back to the screen and the controls. "We've come this far, might as well take it all the way now. Besides, I'm starting to think that maybe this isn't so different from our harvester after all. I always really liked driving that beast." And with that, he released the brakes and applied the throttle that caused the vehicle to set in motion. He gently manipulated the control stick and found the heavy transport responding smoothly to the change of direction and within moments he had it turning down the main road leading away from the warehouse.

It wasn't long until he was comfortable enough with the controls to increase their speed until the driver who had started after his commandeered vehicle gave up trying to chase it. Not soon after the entire warehouse had disappeared from sight.

"Cultural misunderstanding," Dez said, uttering a sarcastic laugh. "Yeah, right."

Eli shrugged. "It did get us out of that thing back on Vulcan."

"Barely."

"I don't think this is any worse."

Dez shot him a disbelieving look, taking his eyes off the road and very nearly steering the transport into a ditch before he could quickly readjust. "Are you serious? Vulcan was an innocent schoolboy prank compared to this."

Eli nodded after a moment. "I guess you're right. This could actually land us in prison."

Dez frowned. "Thanks for reminding me."

"Hey, it's for a good cause."

"I'm sure a lot of crimes start out that way. Small comfort when we are sitting in a jail cell, staring at the bare walls."

They decided that going on the run, and hiding the shipment away somewhere was pointless, especially considering the vehicle's large size and slow overall speed. It was only a matter of time until the driver would alert the authorities and they'd catch up with them.

Instead, the plan was to head straight toward the center of town and unload the cargo right there, spending as much time as possible giving away the life-saving drugs to anyone who asked for them and before the authorities were able to put a stop to it. The idea had been first born when Melna and Derla had told them about the still very much alive local goodwill tradition of handing out food and other necessity to less fortunate people at the town square.

"Always wanted to play the role of Robin Hood."

Dez just shook his head. He had never heard of the fellow.

The going was slow but traffic was light enough to avoid any unfortunate accidents with other vehicles with an inexperienced driver at the controls.

Apparently, there existed a rule, written or otherwise, to give transports carrying the official government seal the right of way.

"Looks like we're in luck," said Eli as they approached the city square and noticed the already growing crowds as well as other, albeit smaller transports, assembled there, in the process of handing out food and other supplies. "We'll fit right in."

But this didn't turn out to be entirely true. The crowd quickly parted for the official vehicle, allowing Dez to steer it almost all the way to the very center of the large square and until they were almost entirely surrounded by a crowd of curious onlookers who had come here in the hopes of securing a few hand-outs. But apparently, a government vehicle was not a common occurrence during these events, certainly not one driven by a couple of off-worlders.

The crowd had pretty much come to a standstill, with all eyes focused on Dez and Eli as they disembarked.

"So much about fitting in," said Dez.

"What now?"

Dez didn't need to think very long. "Just follow my lead," he said and headed to the back of the vehicle. "People, listen up. Your new government has decided to make the Crimson Flu cure available

to all and we have come from far away to assist with that task." He pointed at the loading doors at the back of the transport and Eli swiftly managed to open them up to reveal crates upon crates of the vaccine stacked inside.

The crowd looked on skeptically, however, clearly not entirely buying this story. Not until Eli remerged from inside balancing a small tower of boxes.

Eli grabbed a couple from him and held them out. "Please, if you need the cure, or if you know somebody who is suffering from the Crimson Flu, take this and make sure it gets to them."

After that it didn't take long for the first group of Yurans to move up until they were close enough to receive one of the offered boxes, inspecting them carefully and once they were convinced that this was, in fact, the real thing, the excitement quickly swept across the crowd with Eli and Dez hardly able to hand them out quickly enough.

And yet even at the height of euphoria over this most unexpected giveaway, Dez was impressed how orderly the crowd remained, having feared a mob or violence, the gathered Yurans were mostly just thankful for their sudden change in fortune.

Eli had spotted a few local peace officers who were clearly not buying this act at all and who had attempted to interfere by attempting to reclaim some of the handed-out boxes. Eli wasn't having this at all. He built himself up to his full impressive height and confronted them – it helped that Yurans were physically smaller than humans – insisting that the Federation had made a deal with their government for the release of the vaccine and that they had simply not yet been told about this change of policy.

Dez had to smile at Eli's impressively convincing performance which caused the peace officers to hesitate and question their own orders, Dez knew it wasn't going to be enough to prevent from getting shut down, but it was going to buy them time to distribute as much of the vaccine as possible.

They had almost cleared half the transport when things began to turn.

The local authorities had called in reinforcements and Dez could spot military-type personnel beginning to stream into the

square from all angles, attempting to disperse the crowd as they made their way toward the center.

For Eli and Dez there was no escape and they backpedaled further and further until their backs were literally against the hijacked transport and they found themselves surrounded by armed and unhappy-looking soldiers.

"Show's over," said Eli.

Dez nodded. "Yeah, looks like it."

Much of the crowd did disperse but many more stayed behind, now cut off from the vaccine by a ring of armed personnel, they remained curious enough to find out what would happen next.

"We must be pretty big news," said Eli. "Look who's come all the way out here to handle this personally?"

Dez followed his friend's gaze to spot Horas Rah emerge from a vehicle and quickly making his way through the crowd, surrounded by soldiers who functioned like personal bodyguards.

"Time to face the music," said Eli.

Rah joined the two off-worlders at the center of the square, took a moment to look over the half-empty transport behind them before he considered them directly. "I'm very disappointed," he said, keeping his voice low enough to not be overheard by the crowd. "I believed we had an understanding, that I had explained the reasoning for the policies we have in place here."

"You explained alright," said Eli. "Doesn't mean we had an understanding."

"I see. And that gives you the right to violate our laws and take matters into your own hands? I admit that I don't fully understand the ways of the Federation but I find it difficult to believe that something like this is acceptable where you come from."

"Compared to withholding life-saving medication to the people who desperately need it? Yes," said Dez without hesitation.

"Absolutely acceptable."

Rah didn't respond right away, taking another moment to take in the scene Eli and Dez had been responsible for. "I am surprised, for a people who pride themselves so much on understanding and respecting other cultures, that you two would show such blatant contempt for ours." He stopped Eli from shooting back a response with a raised hand. "What's done is done, I suppose. Make no

mistake, there will be consequences for your actions. But, for now, perhaps we can still mitigate some of the damage you've done here today. Just play along," he said, and then before either of them could respond, Rah turned to face the crowd who was watching the interaction between their leader and these aliens with great interest behind the cordon of soldiers. "My fellow friends, what has happened here today was the result of an unfortunate cultural misunderstanding between us and our ways and those of our off-world guests."

Eli threw Dez a telling look, mouthing the word he had used earlier himself.

"I have spoken with them both and they fully understand and accept the errors of judgment they have committed, and have apologized to me personally for what has transpired here today. They understand the great sacrifices that each and every one of us has to make to rebuild our great world after the terrible suffering and pain the old regime has caused us. Please rest assured that nobody will be punished for this, not you and certainly not our valued guests, for what has been nothing more than an innocent misconception that is all but expected when new cultures come together in friendship.

As an enlightened, caring and progressive society, we are more than prepared to accept the small bumps in the road that will not stop us on our journey to a promising future for all of us." Rah spoke with his arms wide apart, and clearly, like the skilled orator that he was, no doubt part of his role as a freedom fighter had been to work his charm and deliver speeches to rally the crowds.

He indicated for Dez and Eli to step forward and both did so hesitantly. Dez couldn't stop feeling like he was being treated like a misbehaving schoolboy, being pulled up by the headmaster.

"Even though they have both apologized to me for their actions and failure to understand the intricacies of our culture, they have, more importantly, also agreed to apologize to all of you, for violating our most sacred and trusted laws, and I urge you to forgive them for their shortcomings as I have forgiven them," he said and looked toward the two off-worlders.

Dez and Eli exchanged quick glances and almost as one they shook their heads before Eli took a step forward. "Yes," he said loudly, "we are indeed sorry for what has happened here. We are sorry that

you are being asked to live in a society that seems to value your lives so little, that they will purposefully withhold medication. We are sorry that they feel that some people in your society are more deserving than others and that your own leader, a so-called war hero, is just as happy to go along with this all this madness."

Rah, beside himself with anger, reached out for Eli's arm, pulling him back. "That is enough."

"And I have his apology right here." Eli whirled around with his balled-up fist and delivered a picture-perfect right hook against the unprepared Yurian who dropped like a sack of stones.

Dez didn't remember much of what happened immediately after Eli had knocked out Horas Rah. And nothing at all after the sharp bites of multiple stun guns dropping him and Eli where they stood.

The next thing he did recall was coming to next to his friend right where Eli had expected them to end up all along.

Inside a prison cell.

## Now

Their shore leave to the Great Barrier Reef had been interrupted unexpectedly when Owens had received the devastating news about his father's sudden passing. He had half-heartedly suggested that she stay in Australia, find another guide, and take that dive which he had promised her, but she had seen the change in him straight away.

She knew little about his relationship with his father, except that they had not been particularly close, he had hardly ever talked about him since she had joined *Eagle*, and yet word of his death had shaken him noticeably and it was clear that he was no longer thinking about their expedition or her role in it.

He had left for the ship straight away after she had insisted on taking back the boat herself, even if she didn't know the first thing about piloting a vessel of that type. After some trial and error, she had managed to return the trawler to its home port and afterward had returned to *Eagle*, no longer in a vacationing mood herself.

She found Eli Katanga waiting for her in her office.

"You look awful, Dez. Don't tell me Australia's perfect climate doesn't agree with you."

She shook her head as she walked to sit behind her desk. "The climate was just fine. Having to steer a boat into a harbor while trying to avoid ships twice its size is harder than it looks."

"I thought you were with the captain?"

She took her seat and looked up at him. "His father passed away. He got the news while we were out in the middle of the ocean, about to go in."

"Oh," he said. "I'm very sorry to hear that. How is he holding up?"

"I don't believe I've ever quite seen him like this. It's really hard to tell but I think he's hurting. I think he's hurting and doesn't want anyone to see it. I suppose it's too early to tell."

"I should get in touch with Trenira."

"Eli, no," she said quickly. "The man only just found out his father is dead, let's give him some time to grieve in his own way before we sic a counselor on him. He might have his own way to deal with this loss."

Katanga nodded. "Fine. And I suppose it helps that we are back here instead of somewhere in outer space, hundreds of light-years from the nearest friendly planet. It might help the healing process."

"Doctor Elijah Katanga, physician of the human soul," she said with a small, bemused smile.

"I've been known to heal one or two in my time."

"Sure. Am I right in saying that your visit today was not merely to check up on me?"

"No," he said and tossed a padd he had brought with him onto her desk.

"What's this?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

She picked it up and looked at its content. It seemed to contain several messages he had received over the last couple of days. From what she could tell it was from important Federation officials. She recognized a few names. "Looks like you're becoming popular in your old age."

"Yes, and I don't care for it. Especially since all those fools are bugging me about the exact same thing. Yura II."

She nodded slightly as she read a few of those messages, reaffirming what he was telling her. The Diplomatic Corps was putting pressure on Elijah to issue a formal apology to Yura's head of state, Horas Rah.

"Can't these people get it through their thick skulls?" he said. "This little scumbag is getting exactly nothing from me except perhaps another knock to the head. You told them our position on this, why are they still pestering us?"

Star kept looking over the padd, anything really to avoid eye contact with her old friend.

"You did tell them, didn't you?"

Her silence was equal to an admission of guilt.

"Why the hell haven't you? We talked about this and we both agreed that this whole thing is ridiculous. That we are not going to bow down to a tyrannical little man who holds decade-long grudges."

She finally looked up. "Yes, we agreed that this is ridiculous. But those mining rights are important for the Federation and Starfleet to rebuild our fleet and —"

"And what? To have a few more starships buzzing around, flying the flag, and projecting force to the rest of the universe so that some other bully can come along to challenge us and find out who's got the more powerful toys?"

She raised a hand to this. "We clearly have some philosophical differences when it comes to Federation defense policy and I'm certainly not going to argue with you the benefits — or rather the necessity — of having a strong fleet. I know we're never going to see eye-to-eye on that."

Katanga took a chair to sit down opposite Tazla. "Let me tell you something, we never needed a large fleet back in the day when Starfleet was a true science and exploratory agency. Before it was this military organization some people insist it has become."

Star rolled her eyes dramatically. "Please spare me the good-old-days speech about how Captain Kirk took on the entire Klingon Empire by himself. You like to forget that I've seen those days, too, in fact much more of them than you ever did. And I can tell you right now, things weren't always that rosy back then."

"And I'm not saying that they were. I'm not yet that senile that I can only see the past through rose-colored glasses. But you know what I do know for a fact? I know that we did some good back then on Yura II. You saw the messages we got from random strangers afterward who were able to cure themselves of their loved ones because of the drugs we handed out. Remember Derla? She practically wrote me a love letter, asking me to marry her, after she got her hands on the vaccine for her father."

She nodded. "Yeah, still surprised you didn't take her up on that offer, actually. Do you know what I also remember? Ending up in a jail cell."

Elijah shrugged that off. "So what? Some of the greatest people in history ended up in jail because of narrow minds and bigotry. I don't mind being in the same company as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Nelson Mandela."

"Don't we have a high opinion of ourselves."

"So it might not exactly compare. I'm well aware that we spent just three days in that cell before we were released into Federation custody to avoid a diplomatic incident. Which also means we hardly sacrificed anything for doing a great amount of good."

"They almost didn't let you into Starfleet Medical Academy after that stunt. You and Dezwin both received permanent marks on your records."

"As I said, almost no sacrifice at all. We saved lives, Taz, that's what medical professionals are supposed to do, what Starfleet is supposed to do. And I tell you something else, without what happened back then, we would never have come up with the idea to form MAAP. That's where the seed took root."

Star felt like disputing that fact. It was true that after the episode on Yura II, Elijah and Dezwin first thought about a better way of helping non-Federation worlds with their medical emergencies that ultimately led to their successful petition to Starfleet Medical to create a still very active and busy agency dedicated to just that task. An agency Elijah had led for many years, coordinating relief efforts to all manner of distant worlds. But she wasn't so sure if they wouldn't have gotten there eventually without breaking local laws, assaulting an official, and being banned from an entire planet for life.

"I've done some reading on Yura II and that misguided technocracy they are running there," he continued when Star hadn't responded. "They haven't changed one bit. That pompous dolt Horas Rah just continued the same policies that withheld medical supplies from people not deemed important enough once he gained power. They had fought a civil war for decades and over half a century later, they may as well not have bothered at all. I'm telling you, Taz, I am never going to apologize for trying to save lives. And if I were in that same position again, I wouldn't do a single thing differently. I'd knock that fool on his ass all over again," he said and then stood, rapping his knuckles against Star's desk for emphasis. "You go and tell that to those apparatchiks at the Diplomatic Corps."

With that he turned on his heel and left her office, leaving Star to look at the doors that had closed shut behind him as she leaned back in her chair and uttered a heavy sigh.

\* \* \*

It couldn't have possibly been a more public setting, Tazla Star had thought when she looked across the packed Champ de Mars in Paris where at least five hundred people had gathered and not just Starfleet officers, Federation officials, politicians, and foreign dignitaries but also an entire crowd of Parisians and visitors from far and near.

They all stood on the grass, facing the stage that had been set up there with the iron monstrosity that was the Eifel Tower not far behind it. Star had never much cared for the monument and was generally of the opinion that its early critics had been correct and that this so-called industrial marvel didn't fit at all into a city so dominated by classical art and architecture.

It had apparently long since become part of not just Parisian but also human identity and as such, she took care to keep her own criticism to herself, even if in its current setting it only seemed to help to add to her humiliation as it reached into the sky behind her.

At the center of the stage stood a podium adorned with the official Federation seal and just behind it, at the edge of the podium, six sets of the blue Federation flag and the red and green Yurian

banner flapped side by side in the gentle breeze on this sunny French afternoon.

An exceedingly tall Andorian, the Federation Secretary of Foreign Affairs—Star kept forgetting his name—was standing behind the podium already ten minutes into a long and drawn-out speech about the decade-long friendship and cooperation between the Federation and the people of Yura II. President Santiago was not in attendance but Star had been told that he was watching the event closely, along with billions of people all across the Federation.

She sat on the podium along with other honored guests, even though in her case, honor had very little to do with the reason for her being there. In the chair next to her sat Elijah Katanga, with an expression on his face so neutral, he could have passed as a Vulcan.

Horas Rah, the Governor-General of Yura II, sat at the far end of the stage, watching the Andorian with an arrogant smile and nodding along to a number of his points.

Rah hadn't aged very well and looked nothing like the young, energetic man she remembered from Dezwin Sigus' memories dating back over sixty years ago. He had lost mobility in both his legs and relied on a motorized wheelchair to get around, he looked thin and frail, and if there was any consolation for Star it was the fact that time had not been kind to this man.

She shook off those thoughts just in time to hear the Secretary speaking her name. "And now I would like to take this opportunity to allow Commander Tazla Star from Starfleet to speak a few words about the people of Yura II and our distinguished guest, Governor-General Horas Rah in particular," he said and looked at her.

"Commander?"

Tazla nodded to him but didn't move from her chair. Instead, she glanced toward Elijah by her side. He flat out refused to make eye contact with her, after all, he had made his position on this entire matter very clear.

The Secretary cleared his throat, his gaze becoming a little sharper at her hesitation. This was not a man used to being kept waiting.

Realizing that there was no more point in putting this off, Tazla stood from her chair and pulled at the hem of her stiff white and gray

dress uniform jacket before she began to walk to the podium that suddenly appeared much farther away than it had before.

Tazla didn't mind speaking in front of large crowds, a common enough occurrence as a command-level officer, even if the crowds she had faced in the past had tended to be much smaller, especially if taking into account all those people watching this spectacle via live, Federation-wide broadcasts.

The Andorian offered her a tight smile that quite clearly communicated his displeasure at her sluggish pace but she ignored him as she took the spot behind the podium he had vacated.

She looked over the Champ de Mars and the hundreds of people assembled there, all now watching her.

Just an arm's length or so before her, invisible to anyone on the other side of the podium, hovered the projection of the beginning of the speech that she was about to give. A speech that had been written for her by members of the Secretary's staff, none of whom she had ever met before.

She heard him clear his throat again somewhere behind her.

"Thank you, Mister Secretary," she began and watched as the words continued to scroll up before her, seemingly in thin air. "And thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak today and also to address our honored guest. Sixty-two years ago, the man who would eventually become my former host, Dezwin Sigus, whose thoughts and memories live on inside my symbiont, had the great pleasure to be welcomed as guests on Yura II along with my friend Elijah Katanga. All the more astonishing considering that the entire planet had been engulfed in a long and costly conflict until only a short time earlier, ending an extended period of suffering and inequality.

Instead of a war-torn planet with a beaten-down populace, we found a people full of joy, enthusiasm, and excitement, friendly and more than willing to accept us as their guests.

We had the pleasure of meeting Horas Rah, who even then was an influential political figure and leader of a beautiful province, tirelessly working on improving the daily lives of his fellow Yurans, and yet still finding the time to meet and talk to us about the many great things his world had to offer."

The pause that followed was by design, as the speech was about to switch gears. Tazla took more time than had been planned

apparently, as the next words on her prompter were beginning to vibrate as if to prod her to continue speaking. She uttered a tiny sigh before she did so, one she hoped people wouldn't notice.

"Not everything on our trip went smoothly, I'm afraid to say. In Starfleet we know and understand, in fact, we are taught early on, that different cultures have very different sensibilities. And a young Elijah Katanga and Dezwin Sigus learned an important lesson about such sensibilities when they both foolishly ignored their better judgment and in doing so violated important local laws and customs, causing significant disruptions to the daily life of the good people of Yura. I want to thank Governor-General Horas Rah to allow us the opportunity today to speak about this matter, and to give us the chance to express our great ... regret over the actions that these two young men took that day long ago.

This should serve as an example to young Starfleet officers and Federation citizens everywhere that respect for other cultures, for their traditions and their laws should always be our first concern when we find ourselves as guests on their worlds. Youth and ignorance are no excuses."

At this point, the prompter explicitly stated for her to turn to Horas Rah and Tazla once again hesitated doing this until the words began to tremble again.

Rah looked particularly self-satisfied as he closely watched Tazla Star. "On behalf of Elijah Katanga and Dezwin Sigus, I would like to offer our... deepest apologies to you, for the pain and disruption we have caused your people and also to you personally. I would like to reiterate that..." she stopped for a brief moment, the words leaving a sour taste in her mouth. "I would like to reiterate that even though we...." Tazla stopped herself again, unable to look at his face any longer, she turned back to the crowd which was watching closely, probably even more so now since she was apparently developing second thoughts in the middle of her speech.

She shook her head. "You know what? To hells with all this. It isn't right."

The Andorian Secretary was at her side in an instance. "Commander," he hissed.

"No, not like this," she said and looked at Elijah who began to nod to her encouragingly. "Yes, we made mistakes back then, I agree

to that. Punching a government official in the face probably ranks near the top of those."

There were audible gasps coming from the crowd. A few bursts of spontaneous laughter as well.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" the infuriated Andorian said in a sharp and urgent whisper.

Tazla ignored him and turned back toward Horas Rah whose face had become even paler than it was naturally. "But no apology about this incident is complete without pointing out that what we did was the right thing. Yes, we did it the wrong way, because we should never have had to do it in the first place. That was your job. Looking out for your people and providing them with the medication they desperately require is not just good leadership, it is the absolute least leadership should do. And you failed your people in that regard and you should be ashamed of yourself for allowing this to happen, and not sit there and gloat over an apology you have been holding out for over half a decade because somebody knocked you out in front of your own people."

The Secretary grabbed Star by the arm even before she had finished talking. "You are done here, Commander."

"Yeah, you're right about that," she said and allowed him to push her off the podium even while she took in the stunned faces of the crowd, some with large smiles plastered on their faces, some had been unable to keep from laughing while others were petrified. None had expected what had promised to be a dry political speech to turn into a full-blown spectacle.

Elijah stood from his chair and nodded to her, giving her a big thumbs-up.

"I'm not going to do it this way," she said.

"You already did," the Andorian said furiously. "You ruined everything, Commander. Rest assured there will be repercussions."

"Fewer than you might think," she said, causing the Secretary to stare at her blankly. But Tazla turned around and headed toward the edge of the podium. "Computer, end program, and show exit."

She didn't even slow down as the large door arch shimmered into existence before her and the heavy panels slid apart to reveal *Eagle*'s corridor just beyond. By the time she had reached the doors, Paris had already vanished behind her.

\* \* \*

She stepped into Elijah Katanga's office at oh-seven hundred twenty hours which had become almost like routine, certainly since *Eagle's* last mission and her return to Earth. She carried a cup of coffee and set it onto his desk in front of him before she took a seat. "Good morning."

He looked up with suspicion in his eyes. "There's something you want."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Why do you say that?"

"Because you never bring me coffee. In fact, Dez tended to pull this trick on me whenever he wanted a favor. It was predictable then and it is predictable now."

"I'm not Dez."

He rolled his eyes. "Semantics."

"Things change, Eli. Except maybe for you. Still not a morning person."

He picked up the mug and began to sip on it very slowly. "You certainly didn't forget how I like it. Columbian with just a tad of cream."

She smiled. "It should put you in a better mood," she said and then presented three padds she had brought with her and placed them on the desk. "And I need you to be, seeing that there are some medical requisition reports for you to sign that Starfleet Medical has been chasing me about for days. Would appreciate it if we could get this out of the way up front." She gave him her sweetest smile.

He sighed heavily. "See, I was right, you do want something. Fine, let's get this over with then," he said and grabbed the padds with his other hand, didn't even bother looking them over as he added his thumbprint to all three of them in quick succession before looking back up. "Happy?"

"Ecstatic," she said and took those padds back off him.

"I also wanted to talk to you about Yura II some more, I've been doing a lot of thinking on that subject."

To that Katanga uttered a heavy sigh. "Have you now? For the life of me, I cannot figure out why. I gave you my answer and that's that. I thought we had finally put this thing to bed."

"We will, trust me, but it's just been bothering me. Don't get me wrong, I agree with most of what you said, Horas Rah was in the wrong, still is. Withholding medication is a terrible policy under pretty much any circumstance. If it were up to me, we wouldn't be signing any kinds of treaties with his government until they can demonstrate that they're doing everything within their power to treat their own people humanely. If it were up to me, I would use the full weight of the Federation's admittedly waning power and influence to ensure that they do. But the truth is, Eli, it's not up to me, and it's not up to you either."

But Katanga shook his head. "And maybe that's the problem. Maybe we're not willing enough to force a change because it's just so much easier to say that this is how things are and there is nothing we can do to change them."

"So you're going to take a stand? What you're talking about is a fundamental change in Federation policy which has been in place for nearly two-hundred years."

He shrugged his shoulders. "It needs to start somewhere. Why not here?"

Tazla stood from her chair. She was not willing to get into a philosophical conversation with her long-time friend. "If this is the battle you want to pick, be my guest. But I won't be joining you on that crusade."

"Instead you'll bow to the powers that be and publicly humiliate yourself?"

"I won't be doing that either. I think I realized that's not my style," she said with a little grin. "I have managed to talk the Secretary into a written apology instead. He's even agreed to my wording, with a few minor adjustments."

"I don't care if it's a public speech with the entire Federation watching or a one-sentence note delivered on the back of a bar napkin. If you want to put your name on an apology, go ahead but you know my position. I'm not going to sign anything that even hints at an apology to Horas Rah."

Tazla walked toward the exit and then stopped, taking a deep breath and bracing herself for what she knew was coming next. Then she turned back to face him.

He seemed to be able to tell something was very wrong the moment he saw her eyes. "What did you do?"

She lifted one of the padds she had given him. "Not all of these were medical requisitions."

He stood angrily. "You tricked me?"

"I made a command decision."

"Against my explicit wishes."

She took a small step forward. "That's just the thing, Eli, this isn't about you or me, this is about much bigger things. I'm sorry I had to do this, I really am, but your moral outrage is terribly misplaced. Yes, Horas Rah was wrong but you know what? So were we. We signed up to be Starfleet officers, nobody forced us to be. And with being a Starfleet officer there also comes a certain responsibility, if you like it or not. And we're expected to hold ourselves to that standard no matter the situation and especially if we don't agree with it. That's part of the deal that comes with the uniform."

I know you don't care for politics, but we live in a different age now, the Federation has changed more over the last six years than it has over the last sixty. But to be honest, I am not so convinced that it hasn't always been a very different place than what you thought it to be."

He simply glared at her and Tazla could sense the anger and disappointment he was directing at her without even saying a single word.

"I'll always be your friend, Eli, but sometimes I have to be more than that. Sometimes I have to consider the kind of things that you have the luxury to ignore."

He nodded slowly but not so much in agreement as in realization. "Yes, you have to be the good little soldier, don't you? I suppose in hindsight this is all my own damn fault. After all, you've been reminding me every chance you had that you aren't Dezwin anymore. That you're a different person now. I guess I just never truly realized that until now."

Those words hurt more than she had expected.

"You've got what you came for, Commander. Now kindly leave me be."

She looked at him but he refused to make eye contact and so she did as he had requested and left his office.

As she stepped out of sickbay and back into the corridor she silently prayed that she hadn't just ended her oldest and most valuable friendship.

# Maximum Entropy

May 2376

"So I think it would be safe to say that I am now officially persona non grata at the annual captain's ball," said Amaya Donners, sitting comfortably in her chair, leaning way back and with her boots on top of her desk. She was playing with a white baseball, tossing it into the air before catching it again repeatedly.

She glanced over to the corner of her ready room where Cosmo, her three-hundred-pound *le-matya* was focusing intently on her movements, his eyes seemingly locked in on the way the white ball bounced up and down. "I see the whole thing more of a blessing in disguise, to be honest," she continued. "No captain in the fleet with an ounce of self-respect would even want to be invited to one of those dress-up, dog and pony shows anyway. I can think of about a hundred and one things I would rather spend my time with than going back there. Who needs that aggravation, anyway, right buddy?" she said and then half haphazardly threw the ball his way. It bounced off the floor just a few feet in front of him and the wild cat effortlessly grabbed it out of the air and quickly began to munch on the ball in its large maw.

Vej, sitting on the couch lining the wall of Amaya Donner's ready room, watched the *le-matya* destroy that baseball with ease for a moment before slowly turning back toward the captain who was now expediently looking his way.

"I suppose this is the part where you tell me that I was out of line telling Captain Aubrey to stick his opinions where the sun doesn't shine. That I should have handled the entire thing much more diplomatically?"

The Ullian counselor, wearing a civilian outfit consisting of a long, tan smock and matching pants which considering that he was not an official member of Starfleet was entirely appropriate, simply shook his head. "No, I was actually just wondering about Cosmo's new toy. I thought that ball was a present from Terrence Glover."

Donners moaned loudly and threw her head back. "Don't get me started on that jackass. That man is so full of himself it's a miracle he doesn't burst at the seams. How he can be related to Samson is one of the great ongoing mysteries of the universe," she said, referring to Admiral Glover, Terrence Glover's father, and her one-time superior at Deep Space Five.

"I take it then you ran into him as well at the event?"

"Trust me, not for a lack of trying to avoid him. It's like a moth to the flame with that one. I don't think I can count the times I've told that guy to lay off."

"Sounds to me you made plenty of enemies. Any new friends by chance? Last time we spoke you were thinking of making amends with Owens."

She was clearly not happy hearing that name either. "You know what, I don't need more friends. I have plenty. I've got you and I have Cosmo," she said, looking at her tamed wildcat who still, after decades in her care, looked more wild than cat.

The large animal raised his head upon hearing his name, the baseball pretty much in tatters now.

"That's right, I'm talking about you, you big, handsome fellow, you."

Cosmo seemed to fathom the compliment considering the way his tapered ears stood up straight, right before he went back to demolishing his new plaything.

"Exquisite company to be in," said the counselor.

Donners shot him a wide smile, her brilliantly white teeth standing in contrast to her dark skin and black hair. "For you, quite right."

"Maybe attending that ball was a bad idea."

"I told you, it was, didn't I? I told you it's the last place I'd be welcomed at."

"But is that because they didn't want you there to begin with or because you couldn't keep yourself in check long enough to try and get along with people?"

Her look became frostier, clearly not appreciating where he was going with this.

"You seemed in fairly high spirits when you left. You said that it would give you a chance to catch up with some of your peers."

She had nothing to say to this.

"It's him, isn't it? You thought he wasn't going to be there but he was."

Donners grimaced before looking into empty space. "He just brings out the worst in me. And every time I think I'm over it and I run into him again, I just want to ... I don't know, scream."

"Maya, that happened twenty years ago while you were both cadets. It's time to let it go and move on."

She shot him a venomous look. "Don't you think I know that? And I want to, I really do. But the truth is that he's never even apologized for what he did. And that's not even the worst of it. I can handle a cheater and a liar. What I can't tolerate is that he's a starship captain. That he became one before I did. That a man with such an obvious character flaw is allowed to wear the uniform and command people. That nobody else seems to see him for what he truly is."

"Don't you think you're projecting your personal feelings you developed decades ago to the man he is now? People change."

She uttered a heavy sigh. "Maybe, maybe not. In any case, you're my counselor. Fix this already, what do I pay you for?"

"Yeah, I don't think you have an accurate picture of how my profession works. The first step is positive thinking. Don't focus on the negative."

"Yes, words of wisdom. Positive thinking," she said with obvious irony in her voice. "That's how I usually get through my day. I just keep telling myself that today is going to be a beautiful day and that everything's going to be fine."

He smirked. "Halfway there already. My job here's almost done. Still waiting for my first paycheck, by the way."

"*Bridge to Captain.*"

Donners smirked. "Ah, saved by the bell." She looked towards the ceiling. "Go ahead."

*"Sir, we have detected an abnormal sensor reading within less than a light-year of our current position."*

"Source?"

"Unclear, sir."

"Our mission is to map the Amargosa Diaspora and this is the most interesting thing that has happened since we got out here. So by all means, set a course for the anomaly, Lieutenant. I'll be right out."

*"Yes, sir."*

"Donners out," she said and removed her feet from her desk and stood. "Looks like we may finally get us some excitement."

"Careful what you wish for, isn't that what they say?" he said as he got up from the sofa and followed her out of the ready room.

"Positive thinking, remember? It's going to be a beautiful day."

\* \* \*

It was the middle of the night shift on the bridge when Donners and Vej entered with the burlesque science officer Wayne Daystrom in command.

The lieutenant had already vacated the center seat, if he had ever occupied it at all, and moved to his station where he tended to feel more comfortable. He shot the captain a glance while she walked toward her chair. "It's an unusual anomaly, Captain, and certainly wasn't there a few minutes ago. We were lucky to catch it at all as we had a full sensor package sweeping that area at the time, otherwise we would have missed it, I'm sure."

"An unusual anomaly? A bit vague for you, Wayne, isn't it?" said Vej as he took the chair to Donners' left.

"I'm still running a more in-depth scan," he said, sounding somewhat defensive. "We should have more momentarily."

"Are we in visual range yet?" asked the captain.

Daystrom nodded even as he continued to study his console. "Putting it on screen now."

Donners couldn't see anything other than the dense cluster of stars that were common in this area of space. "Magnify."

The screen shifted but it made little difference.

"Maximum magnification."

Donners sighed and looked back at her science officer. "Are you quite sure there is supposed to be something out there?"

"I'm definitely reading a disturbance, Captain."

"Run a level-five sensor diagnostic just in case. Helm, take us in, let us have a closer look at this alleged anomaly."

The helmsman acknowledged and changed course.

It didn't take long for Daystrom to chime up again. "It's not something I've seen before."

"Strictly speaking there is nothing there to see at all," said Vej and he exchanged a quick smile with Donners.

Daystrom either didn't notice the joke or decided to ignore it. "Readings remain inconclusive but sensors are picking up an increased level of neutrino emissions."

"A clocked ship perhaps," said Donners. "A wormhole?"

"Both are possibilities but its uneven distribution is unusual."

"Cap," said Vej and pointed at the screen.

Donners looked up to see that something had appeared after all. A small object was now sitting at the center of the screen, clearly artificial in nature, the metal glinting under the exposure of multiple nearby suns. It seemed too small to be a starship. "Anyone picking that up?" she asked, only slightly masking her annoyance that Vej had been the first to notice it, using nothing more than his eyes, when they were surrounded by state-of-the-art sensor technology that was supposed to alert them of new contacts long before they became visible to the naked eye.

"Sorry, sir, I'm having trouble getting a clear reading on the object," said Lieutenant Kuvex, the Kasheeta night-shift operations officer.

Donners stood and turned to face Daystrom who was still hard at work at his station, his eyes glued to his instruments. "Wayne?"

He shook his head. "There is nothing there, Cap."

She exchanged a quizzical look with Vej, then looked back at the screen for indisputable visual evidence before she turned back to her science officer. "I'm pretty sure there is. If you'd like we can take a vote but I think things would come out my way. Unless you're telling me that all our eyes are deceiving us."

"I'm picking up increased neutrino readings in the area but sensors are positive that there are no other objects within ten million kilometers of our position," he said as he continued to tap away at his station, perhaps hoping to get different results if he just kept changing parameters.

"Wayne?"

"Sir?"

"Look up for a moment."

He stopped working and glanced her way.  
Donners pointed at the screen. "Just tell me what you see out there."

He looked passed her to study the view screen. "There appears to be some sort of small-sized, artificial object approximately two hundred fifty-thousand kilometers from our position."

She offered him a little smile. "Thank you. Now, what do you think we should do about it, seeing that it isn't showing up on any of our sensors."

The look he offered in response showed that he was at a loss. Wayne Daystrom may have been a scientific genius, a direct descendant of one of the greatest minds in the Federation, but as it turned out, without empirical data, he simply was not able to formulate a hypothesis.

Donners let it slide. For all his genius, she knew that Daystrom was still a young man and some things could only be learned through experience. She turned toward the helm to find Ensign Najila Ali who was handling navigation during gamma shift. "Ensign, get us closer to that object. Half impulse for now and then reduce speed incrementally as we get closer. I want to approach this thing, whatever it is, real slow."

"Yes, sir," she said and turned her attention to the helm controls.

"And keep your eyes on that thing. Without a sensor reading, we might not get a proximity warning either. Meaning we have to do this the old-fashioned way and use visual rules."

The young woman nodded sharply to communicate her understanding.

Donners returned to her chair and sat down.

"What do you think it is?" Vej asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Beats me. A sensor probe perhaps. Could be debris from a larger object. Without a reading, it's hard to say." She uttered a little laugh. "Guess that's what it must have felt like in the early days of space travel."

"Feeling nostalgic?"

"Not really. Half of those early explorers never got to come home."

He frowned. "Sorry, I asked."

On the screen, the object was slowly growing in size. But as Donners had asked for a sluggish approach, it took a while for the ship to get close enough to make out any details.

"Definitely looks like a vessel of sorts," said Vej.

Donners nodded. "Agreed. But rather small to be this far out by itself," she said and then glanced at operations. "Kuvex, what's the nearest inhabited planet or station?"

The Saurian only needed a moment to bring up the requested information. "The nearest Federation outpost is Arkaria Prime which is six point two light-years from our present position. The closest non-Federation world is the Krellonian colony Piquus VII which is three point two light-years away. There are no other known inhabited outposts in closer proximity."

"I have referenced the visual data of the object with our database and it doesn't match any known configurations," said Daystrom.

"In all fairness," said Donners. "We don't exactly have a wealth of information on the Krellonians, do we?"

"That is true."

"Do you think it could be one of theirs? A shuttle perhaps?" asked Vej.

She nodded. "Possible but not likely. The Krellonians don't venture beyond their borders much. And why would their ship just appear out of nowhere like this? And is it the cause of the anomalous readings and the neutrino emissions? Those are questions I'd like some answers to." She directed her attention toward the gamma shift officer manning the tactical station. "Ensign, hail the object."

The Andorian shook his head. "No response, sir."

"Alright, open a channel then."

"Channel open."

Donners cleared her throat. "This is Captain Amaya Donners of the Federation starship *Agamemnon* to the unidentified vessel off our bow. Please identify yourself and state your intentions."

"Message sent, no response," the tactical officer said after a few moments of silence had gone by.

"Keep running that, maybe we'll get lucky. Ensign Ali, what's our distance to the object?"

"About thirty thousand kilometers. Give or take a few hundred."

"That's well inside transporter range, I take it we still can't get a reading on this thing, or who or what may be on board?" the captain asked.

"No, sir, still not showing up on sensors," Daystrom said.

"Alright then, let's bring it onboard. Najila, get us into tractor beam range, keep it nice and slow. Kuvex, once we are in range, bring it into the main shuttle bay and erect level-eight force fields around it."

Both officers acknowledged the orders.

Vej leaned closer to the Donners at his side. "Is that wise? Bringing it on board when we don't know anything about it?"

She smirked at that. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I lost it when you started talking about those early explorers and their success rates."

"We are in tractor beam range," Ali said from the helm.

Donners nodded. "All stop. Kuvex, bring it in."

"Activating tractor beam."

On the screen, Donners watched as the azure graviton beam grabbed hold of the object and began dragging it toward them. "Well, at least now we can confirm it's definitely not a mass hallucination."

"Captain," Daystrom spoke up, sounding excited. "I'm starting to get readings from the object now. It is seven point three meters long, three point two meters wide and two point six meters in height. It is composed of different types of duranium alloys. I also read a low-powered warp and sub-light engines as well as a life support system."

"Life signs?"

It took the science officer a moment longer to determine this but once he did, he began to nod. "Yes, sir. One life sign, humanoid, possibly human, but it is weak and irregular," he said and looked up. "I think the occupant may be injured."

"Bridge to sickbay, prepare to receive a possibly injured humanoid from an unknown vessel. Full quarantine procedures. Signal when ready and we will beam our guest directly to sickbay," Donner said, glancing at the ceiling.

*"This is sickbay, acknowledged. I will summon Doctor Ssesar-Rass and let you know when we're ready to receive the patient,"* the on-duty nurse responded.

Only a few brief moments later Kuvex turned from his station to glance at the captain. "Sir, the vessel is secured in the main shuttlebay. Force fields are in effect as to your orders."

She nodded.

*"Sickbay to bridge, we are ready down here."*

Amaya Donners stood from her chair. "Kuvex, get the transporter room to beam the occupant directly to sickbay," she said, and then to Daystrom: "You probably want to get a better look at that ship. Meet an engineering team down there and let me know what you find. For now, I want scans and external observations only. Don't try to enter the vessel until we know more about it."

Daystrom nodded and got out of his chair, already summoning engineering for assistance as he headed for the turbolift.

"You coming?" said Donners, shooting a sideways glance at Vej.

The counselor stood and nodded "Consider my sense of adventure rekindled."

"Beautiful day," she said as she made a beeline for the secondary turbolift.

Vej followed her closely. "You'll keep saying that and you'll jinx it, you know."

\* \* \*

Sickbay was a hive of activity.

Doctor Rass, the green-scaled, Selay chief medical officer with her cobra-like shaped head, was calmly delegating a whole flurry of nurses and medical technicians while she stood next to the occupied bio-bed performing scans on her patient.

A single, armed security officer was posted by the door, a standard precaution when beaming onboard an unidentified individual, even one who required treatment.

Donners was not able to get a good look at the patient straight away with all the movement around the bed and she felt it prudent

not to get any closer to avoid interfering with the work of the medical professionals.

She and Vej remained near the doors and for a moment simply watched on as these men and women were diagnosing and administering treatments under Doctor Rass' guidance and direction.

It was obvious that they were getting a handle on the situation. The patient had arrived in poor condition apparently but from what Donners was able to gather, it was no longer life-threatening and recovery appeared likely.

Once things began to quiet down, she took a small step forward. "What do we have, Doctor?"

Rass turned her head ever so slightly towards the visitor. "Ah, Captain, I did not see you there."

She nodded understandingly. Her primary focus was her patient, she couldn't fault her for that.

"Human male, approximately forty-five years old. Initial signs point toward exhaustion, possibly brought on by high levels of stress and malnutrition. With the appropriate treatment, he is likely to make a full recovery."

Donners couldn't deny that this surprised her somewhat. The galaxy tended to be far too large to come across another random human, particularly outside of Starfleet and this far from an inhabited Federation colony. Stranger things of course had happened.

While she was not able to see his face, she did notice him stir slightly, seemingly coming back around. She could see him reaching out and grabbing hold of Nurse Xolani Nyembe's wrist.

"Where am I, what is this place?" he practically croaked, still weak and sounding confused.

Nyembe offered the man a sympathetic smile. "You are on the Starfleet vessel *Agamemnon*. In sickbay. Can you tell us your name?"

"Starfleet?"

Nyembe nodded. "Yes. You're going to be all right. What is your name?"

"My ... name?"

There was something strangely familiar to this man's voice, Donners was certain she had heard it before. She took another step closer to be able to see past the medical team surrounding him and froze instantly.

She hadn't seen that face in ten years and he looked significantly slimmer and more haggard than the last time he had come across him. His black and silver hair was trimmed shorter but his hawkish facial features were impossible to forget.

"Security to sickbay on the double."

All eyes turned toward Donners with a mixture of surprise and disbelief. After all, it seemed rather unlikely that this man, in his currently dazed and exhausted state was posing much of a threat to anyone, and certainly not one that the current occupants of sickbay, including one armed guard, couldn't handle.

The guard present did not hesitate and quickly stepped up to Donners, awaiting further instructions.

"Captain?" Doctor Rass asked, her limited facial expressions were not quite able to mirror the puzzled looks of her colleagues but her eyes made it clear that she was just as surprised.

But Amaya Donners didn't react to any of this, instead, she kept her steely focus on the man still lying on the bio-bed. He didn't appear entirely certain what was happening around him either, it seemed he was still trying to get to grips with where he had landed or what his own name was.

After a few more quiet seconds, the door to sickbay opened and two additional armed security guards entered.

Donners spoke without looking their way. "Take this man to the brig at once."

That caused a few more surprised gasps by the medical team who had still not been offered an explanation for their captain's unexpected behavior.

Rass took a defiant step forward. "Captain, I must protest, the patient is still in my care and is not ready to be discharged. Besides, he has shown no signs of posing a threat to anyone. Certainly not in his current condition."

The security team hesitated for a moment, looking back at Donners for confirmation.

"You have your orders," she said sharply and then glanced back at the chief medical officer. "You are free to administer any additional treatment in the brig under armed supervision."

The security guards grabbed the confused man and dragged him off the bed, having to steady him as he was quite clearly unable to walk under his own power.

"Captain, this is not—"

"This man is a mass murderer, Doctor. I will not tolerate his presence anywhere other than a secured area and behind a force field. If you have any objections to this, note them in your log," she said and watched the man being dragged out of sickbay.

As soon as the doors had closed behind them, she turned around and chose a different exit to make a prompt departure, leaving behind a startled doctor, counselor, and medical team.

\* \* \*

It wasn't until the third chime that Amaya stopped in her tracks after having seriously endangered the carpet of her ready room from her incessant pacing, and shot the doors an annoyed look. "Alright, come in."

The doors parted to allow Vej to enter. He did so slowly. "I was just about to call a medical emergency."

"The more likely reason for somebody not answering their door is that they don't want to be disturbed."

He stepped all the way inside so that the doors closed behind him. "That can't be it, after all, who wouldn't want to talk to a counselor?"

"In case you haven't been able to tell, I am not in a joking mood tonight."

Vej offered a small, serious nod, acknowledging her obviously poor disposition. Even Cosmo was practically cowering in the far corner of the ready room, knowing to stay well clear of his mistress when she was in one of her moods.

"It seems we picked up some sort of criminal in the middle of nowhere," he said carefully. "Funny, he didn't strike me as the dangerous type."

"You of all people should know that looks can be deceiving."

"I tend to see more than most people."

She shot him a dark look. "You read his thoughts?"

The Ullian quickly shook his head. "Of course not. You know my policy on this. Not without explicit consent. But spending a lifetime as a telepath, not to mention being a fairly decent observer of humanoid behavior, has given me at least a little bit of insight into the nature of the people I encounter."

"Please, even you can't judge a book by its cover after just a few minutes," she said and walked over to her desk. She picked up a padd and practically flung it Vej's way.

The counselor very nearly fumbled the device, before he had a firm grip on it and was able to study the content. "Doctor Westren Frobisher," he said and looked up. "The name sounds familiar."

"Keep reading."

And so he did. "According to this he along with his research partner worked on a dark-matter transporter device, designed to be able to transport people and objects over vast spatial distances. However, looks like the technology was abandoned when an experiment ten years ago failed and led to the death of—" he stopped reading and looked up. "Doctor Matthew Owens?"

Donners was leaning against her desk but refused to make eye contact with the counselor, her gaze instead directed at the window and looking into the emptiness of outer space. "That's right. Michael Owens' brother."

"The same man you dated during Starfleet Academy and with whom you had a major falling out when you found out that he had cheated on you with another woman."

"To be precise, he cheated on her with me."

"I stand corrected. But I still don't understand why the death of Matthew Owens would make this man, you decided could not be treated in sickbay over the objections of your chief medical officer, a dangerous mass murderer."

She stood away from the desk and looked straight at Vej. "Because, what that file you have there fails to mention, is that Westren Frobisher, disregarding all safety procedures as well as orders to cease his actions, caused the death of over two-hundred thousand people when his experiment failed disastrously."

To that Vej's eyes opened wider and he went back to look over the padd to see if he could find any indication of what she had claimed.

"Don't bother trying to find any references in the official reports as Starfleet decided to cover the whole affair up. But look up the freak atmospheric anomaly on Sentaka XII that led to half a continent being practically baked alive, and you will find that it took place at exactly the same time as Frobisher's failed experiment half a sector away."

"I remember that. They talked about that incident for months on the newsnets without ever providing a satisfying theory for the cause of that disaster."

Donners uttered a little humorless laugh. "Yeah, there was a cause alright. And he's sitting in our brig. And the reason I know this is because I was there when it happened."

"You were on Sentaka XII?"

She shook her head. "No. I was on an inconsequential and uninhabited planet light-years away. Frobisher and Owens ever only suspected any fallout at the departure point. As it turned out, it was the destination that was in real danger."

"I ... I honestly don't know what to say."

"Yeah."

Vej looked back at the padd but when that offered no further insights into this situation, he looked around the room for a moment, obviously trying to put the pieces together. "What is he doing out here?"

She shrugged. "Who knows? Starfleet took him into custody after that incident but he managed to escape sometime after and has been on the run ever since. Officially he has only ever been charged for the murder of his colleague Matthew Owens, so obviously he wasn't as much of a high-profile fugitive as he should have been. Maybe he's been working on another experiment. Maybe that's what our sensors picked up out here."

He nodded slowly. "You might be right. What happens now?"

Donners seemed stumped by that question, clearly, in all her anger over coming across Frobisher, she hadn't even considered her next move yet. "I suppose we'll have to head to the nearest Starfleet outpost, Arkaria Prima, and hand him over to the authorities there."

"That makes sense," he said and returned the padd onto her desk before heading for the doors. He stopped just short and turned

around again. "According to Doctor Rass, he has been asking to speak to you?"

"Absolutely not."

"I can understand why you wouldn't want to."

"He's a murderer."

"There is that."

She shot him another dark look. "What else is there?"

"It just strikes me that you have been avoiding the people who have caused you anger and anguish. From a purely therapeutical perspective, I think it would be good for you to face these issues head-on." He continued when Donners offered nothing but a blank stare in response. "You asked me earlier today to earn my pay as a counselor. Well, if you want my professional opinion, go see this man. You don't have to talk to him, but at the very least, look him in the eye and stand your ground instead of internalizing all your anger and your frustrations." With that Vej turned and left the ready room.

\* \* \*

Against her own better judgment, Amaya Donners decided to follow Vej's advice after all and visit Frobisher in the brig. She wasn't entirely sure what her counselor thought this would accomplish but she had to begrudgingly admit that he was at least partially right. She did have a lot of anger boiling inside of her. But as far as she was concerned, that anger was entirely justified. And how could it not be? After all, Frobisher had been responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people through his actions. There was, as far as she was concerned, no emotion more appropriate than furious anger when considering Westren Frobisher.

If anything, perhaps she had to prove to herself that she was able to face this murderous and despicable man without losing control of herself and her emotions. She was a Starfleet captain after all and an entire ship and crew depended on her ability to make levelheaded and rational decisions.

She took a deep breath before entering the detention complex, determined to not let her emotions get the better of her which was particularly difficult since, for her, his actions had also had a profoundly personal meaning. She had been right there for all of it.

Maybe could have even prevented the ensuing disaster if only she had seen through his false confidence much sooner than she had.

The heavy doors opened with a loud pneumatic hiss and she found all cells empty except for one. And even though she had purposefully taken her time before coming down to this place—four hours had passed since he had first come aboard—she found that Doctor Rass was still with Frobisher in his cell, along with two of her nurses. They had moved an entire biobed and a few medical devices into the cell with him and were still treating him for whatever injuries he may have suffered.

Even worse as far as she was concerned, the protective energy field that kept prisoners confined was deactivated and none of the five armed security guards were on high alert, each with their weapon holstered, including the two officers inside the cell with Frobisher and the medical personnel.

"I gave clear orders to have the prisoner confined," Donners said sharply, trying to suppress her irritation that was threatening to well up again after she had done so well in trying to control it.

The Selay doctor turned to face her. "The patient does not pose a danger to anyone in his current condition. Particularly not while in a cell and surrounded by armed guards."

Donners was certain she could hear a hint of indignation in her voice even while her unexpressive Reptilian facial features didn't provide much indication of her general disposition.

She took a small breath to calm herself before she spoke next.  
"What is his condition?"

"Stable for now. He was suffering from severe exhaustion brought on by several factors we have not yet been able to determine," she said. "He is likely to recover if we continue with the current treatment regime."

The implication was not so veiled even to her ears. In other words, had they done nothing, and left him to his devices in the brig as she had wanted, he would have been in a far poorer condition. Donners was not able to work up any kind of regret or second thoughts over her orders.

She looked past the doctor to glance at the man on the bed. He was, without doubt, the same man she had met while she had been the chief engineer on the *Columbia* ten years ago and whom she had

assisted with his experiment that had led to such disastrous consequences.

He looked weak, frail, in fact, and nothing quite like the energetic personality he had been back then when he had practically glowed with the excitement of making his life's work a reality and enshrining his name in the history books. He was conscious but his glassy stare seemed directed toward nothingness.

She quickly cast off any doubts that this weak man who was little than a shadow of his former self would pose any serious challenges to her self-control. "I would like to speak to the prisoner alone. Give us the room, please."

"I do not recommend this, Captain," Selay said. "He is still very weak and requires supervision."

"Fine, I'll be here supervising. Stay close by, if his condition worsens in any way, I make sure to call you," she crossed her arms below her chest to underline her stance on this.

Rass apparently realized that there was no arguing with the captain and before checking the medical instruments monitoring Frobisher one last time, she collected her staff and slowly turned for the exit. But not before shooting Donners one last, piercing glare, no doubt to try and communicate her displeasure with her orders of late.

Donners all but ignored her doctor and looked at the guards next. "Reactivate the force field and leave us."

There were of course no objections of any kind from the security personnel that did as requested and then headed out to leave Donners alone with Frobisher safely ensconced behind a nearly impenetrable wall of energy.

Once everyone had left, she took a few small steps closer to the cell, carefully studying the prisoner on the biobed. "You asked to see me," she finally said without preamble and with a tone that left no doubt of her general annoyance.

It was only now that he seemed to have noticed her presence. He turned his head slightly in her direction. "You ... you're the commander of this vessel?"

"Captain Amaya Donners."

"Thank you ... for coming."

"Formerly of the starship *Columbia*."

Frobisher climbed out of his bed, probably not a wise decision since he nearly collapsed to the floor had he not steadied himself quickly. Donners, of course, made no move whatsoever to try and assist him in his struggles to keep upright.

"I wish to thank you for your assistance so far," he said and looked around the cell as if only now realizing where he found himself. "And I understand your need for ... caution."

"This is where you belong."

He nodded absentmindedly before he glanced back at her, taking a few, awkward steps closer. "There is another favor I must ask of you and it is imperative that we waste no time."

"You don't recognize me?"

He looked her in the eye. "I have to apologize, my journey has left me somewhat disconcerted. I think much more so than I had anticipated. My memories seem out of sorts in a manner of speaking. I am having difficulties grasping all of them at present. I can remember some things clearly and others are seemingly floating just at the edge of my awareness." He continued when he noticed her blank expression. "I have no doubt everything will fall back in place with time but if there is one thing I am certain of, it's that time is not something we have in any abundance."

"You are Westren Frobisher, you don't deny that?"

He shook his head. "No. I think you're right. That is my name."

"But you don't remember me? How about the *Columbia*? How about Sentaka XII," she said that last name with particular intensity.

Frobisher shook his head. "No, I'm sorry," he said and turned away, rubbing his forehead as if trying to jog his memory.

Donners wasn't buying any of this. She was not going to accept his attempts of trying to use amnesia or some sort of insanity defense to get himself out of his responsibility. "Periphocles IV means nothing to you? How about a dark-matter accelerator or the name Matthew Owens?"

He froze suddenly and then turned back to her. "Matthew? Yes."

"He was your colleague."

He nodded. "Yes. And a friend."

"You killed him."

His face turned to an expression of confusion and then outright denial. "No."

"Yes, you did, Doctor. You killed Matthew and many more people. And I was there when you did. And now you just happen to appear out of nowhere, light-years from anywhere of consequence and you have conveniently forgotten all about your crimes."

"Please, listen to me, whatever you think I am —"

"Oh, I know exactly who and what you are, Doctor. And I will make certain that you will never be able to hurt anybody ever again. You may not have been publicly held accountable for what you have done, but I will guarantee that you will pay nevertheless. And that is the only thing I have to say to you," she said and then turned and headed for the exit.

"If we don't act, thousands, perhaps even millions more lives will be at risk."

Donners stopped but kept her back to him.

"Whatever you think of me, what I may or may not have done, I plead with you to put that aside for just a moment," he said, his voice sounding desperate now. "Something is happening, something terrible, something that could change the face of the galaxy as we know it. There is a small chance that we can still influence events that may already be in motion, but I will need your help to do so and we don't have much time. Please."

She turned around very slowly.

"We are in the Amargosa Diaspora, yes?"

She was tempted to tell him nothing at all, to not give him the satisfaction, but in the end, she responded with the slightest nod.

"Good, good. We must be near the original coordinates. About four light-years from Arkaria Prime?"

"What is this threat you're talking about?" She couldn't help herself. She was after all still a Starfleet officer and no matter how much she despised this man, if there was even a kernel of truth to what he had said, she couldn't afford to ignore him.

"I think we're close. Very close. I need you to take us to spatial coordinates..." he paused for a moment, trying to remember the correct figures. "Four-two-three mark one-one-two mark five-one. I assume your vessel is capable of high warp, in which case it should take us less than three, maybe four hours to reach that destination."

She uttered a little laugh that had nothing to do with any genuine amusement. "If you think I'm going to take you anywhere other than a prison planet, you're even more insane than I thought."

"Four-two-three mark one-one-two mark five-one, Captain, please."

"What's at those coordinates?"

"I cannot be entirely certain. Maybe nothing at all."

She crossed her arms again. "That's not even close to good enough."

"If there is nothing there, I'll do whatever you ask. I will admit to whatever crimes you believe I have committed. I will publicly confess and offer no resistance to whatever you wish to do with me. But if you find something at those coordinates, we are in a greater amount of danger than you can possibly imagine. And doing nothing will seal our undoing."

Donners considered this for a moment, studying him intently and the way his eyes were pleading with her. It had the opposite effect on her. She felt nothing but disgust. "I've heard enough. There is no deal to be made here, Frobisher. You're a mass murderer whether you admit to it or not and you will be made to pay for your actions." She whirled around on her heels and promptly headed for the exit.

"Four-two-three mark one-one-two mark five-one," he yelled after her. "Four-two-three mark one-one-two mark five-one, Captain. All our lives may depend on you getting us there in time."

She heard his desperate plea even after the heavy doors had closed behind her, sounding very much like the madman she had always known he truly was.

\* \* \*

She had initially planned to repair to her quarters for the night after stopping by the brig but as it turned out her visit with Frobisher had left her with far too much anxious energy to ever hope to get any kind of sleep in the near future and she had returned to the bridge instead.

Vej was still there and he shot her an expectant look as soon as she arrived which Donners chose to ignore even while she walked slowly to her chair and finally sat down. She could feel his insistent look but kept her eyes trained forward and onto the view screen that currently showed the dense star cluster of the Amargosa Diaspora. In truth, of course, she was looking at nothing at all as her fingers drummed rhythmically against her armrest.

Her nervous tension must have been obvious to her counselor but he kept any words of observation to himself for now and Donners felt grateful for this.

Only moments after sitting down she stood again, walking over to the helm station and Ensign Ali.

"Najila, set a course for Arkaria."

The young woman nodded. "Course set."

The helmsman looked up at her captain when she had not given any further orders and as it turned out she wouldn't get any soon as Donners had turned and was now heading for the science station where Ensign Cyril Colquhoun was looking over things.

"Four-two-three mark one-one-two mark five-one."

"Ma'am?"

She took a moment to elaborate. "Tell me what's at those coordinates."

The science officer nodded and brought up the requested information.

"Any natural phenomena or noteworthy installations?"

He shook his head. "No, ma'am. According to our records, there is nothing there at all. All I have is empty space in Cygni-98. An unremarkable star system about a third of a light-year distant to stellar cluster GTR-3298 made up of six stars in very close proximity to each other, but that's all."

Donners considered her next order. "Run a long-range scan of those coordinates."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What's the distance?"

"One point one light-years from our present position, ma'am."

She did the math in her head. "About nine and a half hours at warp eight?" she said, her question really posed more to herself than anyone in particular.

Colquhoun answered regardless. "Yes, ma'am."

She looked down at him, not really having expected the response. "Run that scan, please."

He nodded and she walked back to her chair, sitting down, after having toured half the bridge.

Vej apparently couldn't keep shtum any longer. "What's at those coordinates?"

"Apparently something our guest wants us to see."

He nodded slowly, clearly having guessed something like that. "And you're considering stopping by?"

"I don't know yet," she admitted. "He sounded pretty darn fatalistic about it. End-of-the-world kind of stuff. My gut tells me he is being hyperbolic, maybe even deranged, and sending us on a wild goose chase at best and into some sort of trap at worst."

"If not for that small voice in the back of your head."

She turned to look at her counselor, having forgotten how well he knew her, how well he had learned to read her over the eight years they had known each other. "What if he's right? What if there is something important there and I just ignore it?"

"If you like, I could have a chat with him myself. Those skills I referred to earlier may come in handy in determining the veracity of his story."

Donners mulled this over for a few seconds but then shook her head. "No, it's enough if he's made a fool of me, I don't want him to spread his craziness to anyone else."

"Unless he isn't crazy."

"*Daystrom to Donners.*"

She glanced at the ceiling upon hearing her chief science officer's voice. "Go ahead, Wayne."

"*Apologies for the late call.*"

"It's alright, I'm still on the bridge. And from the sounds of it, I'm not the only one working late."

"*I thought you might want to know that we have finished our external investigation of the vessel we recovered.*"

Donners had all but forgotten that they had brought their prisoner's ship onboard earlier and that she had asked Daystrom to study it. Considering what she had learned about the vessel's pilot,

and the emotions this had stirred within her, that lapse appeared almost excusable. "What have you found?"

*"The overall configuration of the vessel is unremarkable. In fact, the hull appears to be a patchwork of different materials coming from widely different sources, including neutronium and thealium, materials known to be used by the Jem'Hadar and the Borg respectively."*

That gave Donners pause and she exchanged a surprised look with Vej.

*"The ship has no noteworthy armaments and fairly basic propulsion systems but Captain, that power core is something else. We have not been able to identify it by limiting ourselves to external scans and observations but what I have been able to determine is that it is capable of generating at least seventeen thousand teradynes per second. And that's a conservative estimate."*

If his first observation had left her stumped, this one practically left her breathless. Some of the crewmembers who had overheard this, shot the captain astonished glances.

"I take it that's a lot," said Vej who was not nearly as technically versed as the people around him.

Donners nodded slowly, still requiring a moment to process that information. "Our warp core produces about four thousand teradynes."

"It's a lot," he said and then after a moment of thought, glanced towards the ceiling. "Wait a minute, Wayne, you just said that its engines and weapons are garden-variety. What does a tiny little ship like that need that much power for?"

*"That, Counselor, is an excellent question, and I'm afraid we won't find out the answer to that by carrying out a purely external examination."*

It wasn't difficult to tell that the science officer was eager to get a look inside that little ship which he had been prevented to do as to Donners' previous orders. Of course, those orders had been given before she had learned about the identity of the ship's pilot. "Wayne, I want you and your team to find out whatever you can about that ship, take it apart piece by piece if you have to," she said and then considered this for a second. "In fact, I'm coming down there to join you in a minute," she added. Since having taken command of *Agamemnon*, Donners had usually tried hard to stay out of her people's way when it came to hand-on matters but she was still an

engineer at heart and the curiosity that came with it was not always easy to quell. Especially not when she had so many questions she desperately wanted answers to. "Get started, I'll be there shortly. Donners out."

She glanced back at her helmsman who was still looking her way, clearly impressed by Daystrom's report herself. "Najila, set course for coordinates four-two-three mark one-one-two mark five-one, warp eight."

"Yes, sir," she said and turned back to her station to execute the order.

Donners stood.

"I suppose we're doing this," Vej concluded.

"Yes, we are. Even if it means we lose a few hours in delivering Frobisher in front of a judge, I want to know exactly what this man has been up to and if he's as crazy as he sounds."

"Considering what he has been saying and that seriously overpowered little ship in our shuttle bay, crazy sounds pretty good right about now."

She couldn't exactly disagree with that point, already fully aware that this was going to be a long, sleepless night. "I'm going down there to lend a hand. Kuvex, you have the bridge. Colquhoun, keep sensors peeled on our destination, I want to know the moment we are able to get a detailed scan."

Her officers acknowledged their orders and Donners left the bridge with noticeable urgency.

\* \* \*

She hadn't liked to admit it but as it turned out, the power plant in Frobisher's small vessel went completely over her head, even after her extensive training and experience as a Starfleet engineer. She had been able to determine that it utilized some sort of dark matter as a power source, very similar to the accelerator Frobisher and Matthew Owens had designed ten years earlier. But even then, when she had been one of the very few Starfleet officers who had been granted any kind of access, she and the rest of her team had been kept on a very

short leash, and certainly not been allowed to study the device in detail.

In fact, after the disastrous outcome of the experiment, and Starfleet's cover-up, the entire project had been sealed and presumably mothballed in some sort of high-security facility where Starfleet's failures were hidden away from prying eyes, never to be seen again.

She had stopped short of ordering Daystrom and his people to actually take apart the dark matter power core, fully cognizant of its immense power and volatile nature that had, after all, led to the annihilation of half a continent.

Unfortunately, nothing else on the ship had been noteworthy in any way, and the onboard computer had refused to give up much of anything without Frobisher's authorization.

So, after toiling on that vessel for nearly six hours, studying every square inch, taking innumerable amounts of scans, taking apart and putting back together pretty much everything save for the main power core, Amaya Donners and a full science and engineering team had remarkably little to show for themselves.

Tired but mostly frustrated with their lack of progress, Amaya returned to the bridge, with Daystrom in tow, the moment she was told that they were approaching their destination.

Donners found that the bridge had rotated to the alpha-shift in her absence, with Bobby DeSoto at the helm, Tess Allenby at operations, and the tall avian Aurelian Lure Mer'iab occupying the tactical station.

Her first officer, Gene Edison, greeted her by relinquishing the center chair upon her arrival. "Morning, Cap."

She merely grunted in response.

"You've been up all night?" Edison asked with his crisp British accent.

She kept her replies wordless, offering just a nod as she took her chair.

Edison took a moment to look her over and then glanced toward the science officer who had taken his seat in an equally quiet manner. He exchanged a quick look with Vej who was back on the bridge as well, but judging by the way he appeared, he had managed to return to his quarters at some point.

"Maybe we should get some rest before we tackle whatever this is," he said softly.

"I want to get this over with, Gene."

He indicated toward Daystrom and when she followed his gesture she realized how haggard he looked. "Some of us are on our third-straight watch. I think a bit of rest would do us all well."

"He's right, Amaya," said Vej.

She frowned but was hardly surprised. Edison had made a great first officer, having been at her side ever since she had taken command of *Agamemnon* but sometimes, she felt that he was too temperate for her liking. Vej, on the other hand, had expressed on numerous occasions that he thought that he made a great balance to her oftentimes more tempestuous command style.

In truth, she couldn't imagine a better team of consultants by her side. Today, however, she had already decided, she was not going to heed their advice. "Wayne, how're you doin' over there? Are you holding up alright?"

He looked up at her and then nodded eagerly. "Absolutely. Eager to find out what we have here. I'm running a detailed scan of the area now, should have something for you momentarily."

"Good man," she said and then shot Edison a look to communicate her resolve, even if it was obvious that he didn't feel she had necessarily made the most appropriate decision.

He did, however, know when a battle was worth fighting, this one not being one of those. "I understand that you have history with our prisoner."

She nodded. "You could say that."

"And you believe that there might be some truth to what he's telling you?"

"Not for a moment."

That left the first officer momentarily speechless.

"That man can't be trusted. He is responsible for the death of tens of thousands of innocent people and his ship sitting in our shuttle bay shouldn't even exist. Certainly, can't make heads or tails of it. But the boy cries wolf the first time, you have to at least make sure the sheep are alright, no?"

"I suppose so."

She nodded firmly. "Yes. So, the quicker we can check this out, the quicker we can all get the rest we need, and most importantly the quicker we can drop him off with the authorities and get him on his way to spend the rest of his days behind a high-powered force field," she said and then turned back toward the science station. "Wayne?"

"Scan almost complete, sir."

That was not good enough for her. "We must be close to those coordinates already," she said and focused on Allenby, the operations manager. "Tess, can you see?

The blonde woman shook her head. "Nothing, ma'am. Reads as empty space all the way."

"Put it on screen."

The main viewer shifted noticeably to show the familiar backdrop of the Amargosa Diaspora, its dense formation of seemingly countless stars, including a few very noticeable red ones, creating a whole array of overlapping lens flare effects that the screen was apparently unable to compensate for and which was threatening to give Amaya a serious headache.

"How close are we to the coordinates?"

DeSoto answered that one. "Just over two million kilometers, at our present speed we'll be right on top of them in a few minutes."

"Doesn't matter," said Amaya. "There's nothing here."

"Scan complete, Captain," said Daystrom. "I am registering regular levels of dust, cosmic rays, and solar winds as well as expected levels of electromagnetic radiation for a stellar cluster of this magnitude."

"In other words, nothing but empty space."

"Correct."

Donners let herself fall back in her chair, uttering a little sigh and staring at the dense starscape reflected on the screen. She had to admit that there was a certain beauty to the sight and the way in which the colors played off each other. She was also decidedly not in the mood for beauty.

"Alright, I think we have humored this madman for long enough. Bobby, set a course for Arkaria, I think it's more than time to drop off the trash."

"Setting course now," the helmsman confirmed.

Daystrom looked up from his console. "Sir, we are now exactly on top of the —"

The ship lurched violently and without warning, throwing every last person off their feet, including those who had been firmly planted in their chairs.

Donners was flung out of the captain's seat and just about had the presence of mind to tug and roll before landing forcefully on the deck. The impact still hurt. Lights and consoles all around her went dark, flickered a few times, and then went dark again. Several aft stations, lining the rear bulkhead, shorted out with a shower of sparks, filling the bridge with the smell of burned plastics and alloy.

Then there was silence.

The red alert had come on, the red strobes flashing across the bridge, but even the usually ubiquitous klaxons were muted.

It lasted at least five, agonizingly long seconds during which time nobody on the bridge had been able to find enough air that had been forcefully ejected out of their lungs.

Donners' entire body ached from the unexpected landing and her head was still spinning. She knew her ship well enough that something truly extraordinary had happened and she also knew that it was going to be bad.

She slowly pushed herself back onto her feet, ignoring her bruised limbs and spinning head. "Report? What ... hit us?"

The crew was only very slowly getting back to their stations as some but not all computer consoles came back to life. The main lighting remained offline.

Vej and Edison were helping out crewmember strewn all over the bridge while Bobby DeSoto crawled back into his chair at the helm. "I'm not certain."

"Medical emergency, medical team report to the bridge at once."

Donners turned to see Daystrom who had made the call. He was hovering over the prone and unmoving form of Tess Allenby who had been catapulted out of her seat at operations.

Edison joined him a moment later, his fingers reaching to her neck to search for a pulse. He was shaking his head slowly as he made eye contact with the captain. Then he turned back to the lifeless

body of the young woman and with the palm of his hand, closed her wide-open eyes.

Donners didn't feel sorrow about losing a crewman. Instead, it was anger that was beginning to assert itself. Furious indignation at having lost a valued officer because of Westren Frobisher. She would make him pay for adding yet another victim to a long list of people who had been unfortunate enough to cross paths with the mad scientist.

The view screen that had blinked out with most of the other bridge systems flickered back on and then off again revealing nothing.

"I want to know what happened and I want to know now. What the devil hit us?"

Daystrom had very reluctantly left Allenby's dead body behind and moved back to his science station, clearly hoping that work would distract him from just having lost a friend. "According to sensors, we struck some sort of subspace boundary that we appear to have penetrated."

Donners needed a moment to think that one through. "Damage report?"

Mer'iab had returned to his tactical board. "Shields have come on and are holding steady but we have taken serious damage to the forward hull and several systems have been knocked off-line. Sickbay is reporting multiple medical emergencies throughout the ship. They don't have a final count yet."

Donners' eyes drifted to Allenby. Edison had removed his uniform jacket and mercifully covered her head with it. Considering the force of the impact, it seemed almost lucky that so far Allenby was the only casualty. She hoped that this would still be the case when the final tally came in but she already suspected that her prayers would go unanswered.

"Lure, I need you to liaise with engineering and sickbay. I want a full damage report, ship and crew, as soon as possible."

The Aurelian nodded sharply.

"Wayne, get all your people together if you have to. But tell me exactly what happened."

Edison walked up to the captain after finishing his round of the bridge. "Looks like mostly bruises and minor cuts up here. Ensign

Toledo broke his lower arm when he hit a console. That's not counting Allenby," he said.

Donners noticed only then that he was one of the officers with those cuts he had mentioned. A trickle of blood was dripping down into his eyes from a cut on his forehead and onto his red uniform shirt.

She nodded to acknowledge the report and they watched silently as a medical team arrived on the bridge, quickly realized that all help for Tess Allenby would come too late, and then had her body beamed straight to the ship's morgue.

"There is somebody on this ship who could probably provide us with some answers as to what has happened here."

Her eyes drilled themselves into Edison's. "Frobisher. Get him up here. I want him in chains and under heavy guard."

The first officer nodded and left the bridge to see to her order personally.

Donners uttered a heavy sigh and glanced back at the screen, even if there was nothing there to see. "Wayne, make your first priority fixing that damned view screen, I want to see what's going on out there."

The science officer acknowledged wordlessly, clearly somewhat flustered by everything that had happened over the last few minutes, and trying desperately to focus on the most urgent priorities. "I don't think the view screen is malfunctioning, Captain."

Donners frowned and stepped closer to the screen and as she focused on the high-resolution, holographic display, she began to realize that he was right. The image wasn't blank. Something was there but it was very dark and it filled out the entire viewer as if they were looking at a blown-up picture of a black wall. "Alright, then kindly tell me what I'm looking at and what happened to all the stars."

"I am not certain. But sensors are detecting some sort of object in front of us," the science officer said.

Donners was shaking her head. "Not good enough, Wayne."

"Sensors are having a hard time making sense of this."

She whipped around to face him. "I'm getting really tired of hearing this. People are dead. I want to know why."

The intensity of her outburst caused the young science officer to swallow, his dark skin blushing ever so slightly. "I'm working on it," he said and quickly focused back on his instruments once more.

She felt Vej's gentle hand on her shoulder. "Take it easy, Maya, we're all feeling the pressure."

But Donners had neither the time nor the inclination to worry about her people's feelings. "I'll take it easy when this is over." She pointed him towards Mer'iab, where the avian tactical officer was working hard on collating the damage report. "Now, make yourself useful and help Lure with casualty reports."

The Ullian hesitated for a moment, clearly disappointed that she was not heeding his advice, certainly not for the first time, and then gave her a little nod. He may have been a civilian, but he understood that on this ship, she was the ultimate authority and so he followed the order with no further comment.

"Working with visual sensors, I have been able to determine the shape and ... approximate size of the object in front of us," Daystrom said without so much as glancing up from his console.

"Let's have a look."

The screen changed and yet still more than three quarters were made up of the dark object. Instead of a star-filled background, she saw a very light-red, almost pink mass, seemingly interspersed with streaks of white. "I have no idea what I'm looking at here."

The science officer made a few more alterations and the image shifted again, this time to reveal much more of the pinkish background that had entirely replaced the usual black void of outer space. The object appeared massive, multiple times larger than *Agamemnon*, and possessed a distinctly curved shape. Only a small part of the odd object seemed to be visible from this angle.

"Where are we?" said Donners who had never seen anything like this before.

"According to sensors we are still in the Amargosa Diaspora at the exact coordinates we have been provided. However, sensors are no longer reading our surroundings as normal space."

That caught her attention and she walked over to him. "What do you mean? If this isn't normal space, what is it?"

He looked up with a mixture of excitement over this unexpected find, and anxiety playing over his features. "The best I

can describe it without further study would be that we are in a realm of space that sits beyond our own."

"Subspace?"

"Yes and no," he said. "We would have to run additional scans but I think we might be in a layer between regular space and subspace."

Donners began to massage her forehead. As a Starfleet officer, she shared the same innate curiosity about the universe as many of her fellow explorers, but the fact that she had already lost people and that this was all related to the madman criminal Westren Frobisher somehow had robbed her of any sense of wonder. She turned back toward the screen to get a better look. "This object, what is it?"

She couldn't see but Daystrom was shaking his head. "I cannot tell yet. It seems to be composed of a neutronium derivative which is impervious to sensors. And Captain, it is massive in scale."

"What are we talking about here?"

"I am using the data I have collected so far to give us a more accurate representation," he said and within moments the image began to zoom out. And it kept zooming out, and yet the object refused to give away its true shape. It was indeed curved but the remaining edges didn't come into view, even as the image kept pulling back.

"Accelerating visual adjustment," said Daystrom to allow the zoom to step out in larger steps to reveal more and more of the object that seemed to be uniformly black with no apparent or distinctive marks anywhere to be seen.

The entire thing was only helping to make Donners' already painful headache worse.

Daystrom had activated an inset screen to show the scale of the object compared to *Agamemnon* and as the main image zoomed out, so did the inset, showing the shape of the Starfleet ship and the dark, rounded object growing next to it and continuing to grow until *Agamemnon* became nothing more than a dot, almost impossible to make out with the naked eye while the object grew the size of a small moon, then of a planet, then of a star.

Finally, after nearly a full minute the shape became recognizable as a massive, dark ring, sitting within a pink and white background. Donners couldn't even guess the size of that object.

Daystrom seemed to know exactly what she was wondering.  
“The estimated diameter of the object is five-hundred million kilometers.”

Silence greeted that announcement.

Donners' headache was quickly turning into full-blown vertigo, just looking at the immense structure, more than twice the size of the largest artificial superstructure ever recorded and over three hundred times the size of Earth's sun. It was quite simply staggering, even more so to the engineer in her who knew of no race within the known galaxy who had ever achieved constructing a megastructure of this scale.

The silence was finally interrupted by the sound of the turbolift doors hissing open.

Donners tore herself away from the seemingly impossible sight on the screen to find Westren Frobisher, his hands shackled in front of him, and flanked by two armed security officers and Commander Edison.

The scientist immediately focused on what had mesmerized the entire bridge, taking a couple of steps forward.

Donners couldn't be certain but she thought that the expression on his face did not reflect awe exactly. Instead, the structure seemed to have inspired fear.

She didn't care how that thing made him feel one way or the other. “What the hell is that thing, Frobisher? Talk.”

It took him a moment to answer as he took in the sight in front of him. “That,” he said and swallowed. “That is the end.”

Edison, who had been as stunned as the others at discovering the structure, looked over at the man. “The end of what?”

“Of everything.”

Donners fought to keep her anger in check and succeeded barely, taking a few threatening steps towards Frobisher. “I don't have time for your dramatics. I have already lost people over this and I'd be damned if I lose anyone else because of you. I want to know that thing is and I want to know why it is here. And while you are at it, I want to know where exactly here is.”

“Sir,” Daystrom said with apparent urgency and before Frobisher could answer. “I am getting new readings from the object.” His face seemed to be draining of color. “Sir, it's—”

All computer screens on the bridge switched off to display a single symbol, the meaning of which this crew had come to learn intimately. A single, blue Greek letter had appeared on the screens all around the bridge.

"Not this again," Donners moaned, painfully remembering her very first mission on *Agamemnon* when she had first come across the Omega Directive and that had directly led to the destruction of an entire civilization when they had decided to meddle with powers far beyond their understanding.

Fully cognizant that all bridge systems would remain on lockdown until she took action, she quickly headed for the nearest computer station and entered her authorization code that promptly restored standard functionality to all systems.

Daystrom who had his own personal history with the powerful Omega molecule that had just tripped the ship's sensors didn't need to elaborate much on what had just happened. "It's coming from the structure, sir," he said. "Sensors are detecting a massive build-up of the molecule."

"Is it ... moving?" said Vej, who stared at the object on the screen.

Donners followed his gaze and could see it too. The massive structure was in motion. Very slowly but seemingly speeding up by the second.

"Confirmed," said Daystrom. "It has begun to spin on its own axis. Moving at about 500 meters per second and accelerating at an increasing rate."

The ship began to tremble. Nowhere as dangerously as when it had first entered this realm but enough to make Donners nervous.

"The movement is causing increased gravimetric shear. Shields are holding for now but this will only become worse as the structure's momentum increases," the science officer said as he studied his panels.

The captain glanced at the tactical officer. "Keep shields and inertial dampeners as maximum."

The Aurelian nodded and followed her instructions.

But Frobisher simply shook his head.

"Damn it, I want some answer now," she fumed.

"I'm sorry, Captain."

That was not what she had wanted to hear. "It's too late to be sorry."

He nodded. "Yes, you are absolutely correct. It is. But when we spoke earlier, when I asked you, begged you to come here, I hoped that we wouldn't find this here. And even if we did, I prayed we would be in time to stop it," he said and looked back at the screen, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, Captain, but it cannot be stopped. Not anymore. Not here."

"What does that mean?" Edison said.

Frobisher ignored the first officer and stepped even closer to the captain but was held back by Mer'iab after only a couple of steps.

"You have to take me back. I'm not sure yet what all this means, and I know you have no reason to trust me, but our only chance, the only chance for the rest of us, is if you take me back to where you found me. But you have to do it now."

Donners shook her head as if she was entertaining a madman. "You'll go nowhere but back to the brig."

The bridge shook again, stronger this time and more suddenly as if something powerful had gripped it. Donners and everyone else standing were forced to grab something for support in order not to lose their balance. She turned back to her science officer. "That wasn't gravimetric sheer."

"No, sir. The structure is beginning to emit massive amounts of radiation and we were just hit with a first wave."

"That radiation," said Frobisher, "is deadly to everything. We need to get out of here now."

Donners did her best to ignore the scientist. "Wayne?"

"Difficult to say. It's not something I've ever come across, and there are no matches in our database. However, the wave has caused a reduction in our shields by point four percent and the radiation is increasing exponentially."

Donners understood what this meant, the longer they stayed in the place, the quicker their shields would be drained. They had to move. "Alright, let's get some distance to this thing. Helm, reverse course, back us off."

"If we reverse course we will run into the same barrier we struck when we first entered this space," said Daystrom urgently. "We might experience the same effects."

"Adjust your shields to sixteen point two kilo-electronvolts, and keep your speed to under one-quarter impulse, that should allow us to cross back into normal space without taking damage to the ship."

Donners shot daggers at the scientist for a moment. But then she nodded. They couldn't stay in place and returning to normal space seemed to be their best option for now. It seemed unlikely to her that Frobisher, no matter how crazy he was, would give them a frequency that would harm the ship he was traveling on himself. "Do it. Alter our shield modulation and keep your speed below one-quarter sublight."

Moments later *Agamemnon* trembled slightly once more, as if encountering resistance in her path, but it was nothing compared to their first crossing. The main screen displayed the bountiful Amargosa Diaspora again, set against a suddenly quite soothing black void of space.

"Give me an aft view," Donners said as she took her chair again.

But there was nothing there. The oddly rosy and white space, as well as the superstructure, had completely disappeared as if it had never been there in the first place, instead replaced once more with the more familiar look of the dense star cluster.

"I am still reading the radiation waves," said Daystrom. "They have increased at an even higher rate." He paused for a moment, his face scrunching up in a frown as he studied his readouts. "Space immediately around the coordinates of the barrier seems to be disintegrating."

Donners shot him a puzzled look. "Disintegrating? How?"

"I'm not sure, it seems as if the radiation is somehow breaking down matter on a molecular level and at an astonishing rate. At the current speed of expansion, the outer crest of the wave will overtake us in two minutes and twenty seconds."

The captain stood back up, unable to remain in her chair considering what she had just learned. "How do we stop it?"

Frobisher beat Daystrom to an answer. "You can't, Captain. It cannot be stopped."

"I refuse to accept that." She headed for the helm station and where Bobby DeSoto sat. "Keep us ahead of that wave, Mister. Adjust your speed as required."

"Aye, sir," the young helmsman said before entering the required prompts into his console.

From her position at the front of the bridge, she turned to face her crew. "I want solutions. There must be a way to counteract this wave."

"We could try to bombard it with graviton particles but at this point, that would be like using a bucket to hold back the tide. The wave is expanding in all directions at speeds that will shortly exceed our own," said Daystrom, sounding entirely deflated at realizing their inability to prevent what was happening.

"I am so sorry, Captain," said Frobisher, "there is no way to stop what is happening. That annihilation wave will not stop. There is nothing anyone can do about this. But there might be a chance to stop this from happening somewhere else. You have to let me go. You have to take me back."

But Donners was not ready to hear this.

"We are no longer able to keep ahead of the wave," said DeSoto while his fingers danced frantically over his console. "We are already at warp nine point five."

And judging by the way the deck plates rattled under her feet, Donners knew that her ship had reached its upper limit. It wouldn't be able to sustain this speed for much longer.

"Donners to engineering. Geordi, I need everything you can put into the engines and then some."

But her chief engineer's answer was not encouraging. "*You've already got everything we have, Captain. And she won't hold together for much longer like this,*" La Forge said, the strain on his voice mirroring what they were putting on their warp engine.

"Do what you can. Bridge out."

The lights and several computer consoles on the bridge began to flicker. She knew it wasn't related to their high speed. *Agamemnon* should have been able to sustain it for at least a little while longer.

"We are being exposed to a high level of radiation, ship systems are starting to fail," said Daystrom.

And then she felt it too. It started with a tingling sensation on her skin but it quickly went much deeper. She was getting dizzy and suddenly felt weak in her knees. She thought that she wouldn't be able to stand up much longer. "What's happening?"

"Massive molecular decay," said Daystrom who sounded much more strained all of a sudden, as if he was beginning to experience difficulties in forming the words. "It's affecting everything around us, including biological matter."

Donners watched crewmembers all around her starting to collapse, unable to stand on their own feet anymore. And just before she thought she was losing her balance as well, she felt somebody grabbing hold of her. She looked to her right to see that Frobisher had stepped up next to her and was slowly helping her back into her chair.

"This is your doing."

He shook his head. "No. I am—I was, trying to stop it. Please, we don't have much time left."

She looked up at him even as her vision was becoming increasingly foggy and distorted. But it seemed obvious that whatever was affecting her and her crew did not affect him at all. She reached up to wipe away the blood that was beginning to trickle down her nose. Then she saw Vej, climbing into the chair next to hers. "Read him."

"Not without his—"

"We don't have time for ethics anymore," she hissed. "Read him."

Frobisher nodded. "Do it," he said and took a knee in front of the Ullian counselor.

Vej focused on the scientist and Donners could see his eyes opening wide as he started to nod. But a sudden coughing fit seemed to interrupt his telepathic link and prevented him from speaking.

"Goddamnit," Donners swore. She wanted to help her friend but decided her priorities lay elsewhere. "Bobby, change our course ... get us back to where we picked up—"

But DeSoto was no longer sitting in his chair, instead, he was lying motionless on the floor next to his seat, leaving the ship without a pilot.

"Help me up, help me get to the helm," she said to Frobisher.

He didn't hesitate and pulled her back to her feet and led her to the CONN, where she fell into the chair. Operating the controls was a struggle but she somehow managed to alter their course, *Agamemnon* responding more sluggishly than she had ever before. At least her warp engines were still running, and at their present high warp speed, they would reach the location of the anomaly where they had found Frobisher's ship within only a couple of minutes.

She also checked the internal sensors and she found that his vessel was still in the shuttle bay, and just like him, it showed no signs of any damage at all while the ship around them was falling apart.

Donners found a small phaser attached underneath the console and brought it up with a shaky hand, aiming it at the scientist.

Frobisher's eyes widened in shock and he took a step back.

"Restraints," she said.

Understanding dawned on his face and he presented her his shackled wrists.

Donners fired the phaser, keeping it on the lowest setting to avoid hurting him, and after a couple of seconds, the restraints fell to the deck. She then reached out for him, grabbing hold of his arm and pulling him closer until she was able to take hold of his neck to pull his head near hers. Her eyes pierced him like icicles. "Go and fix this."

He nodded as much as he could with her hand tightly on his neck.

It slipped away and he headed for the exit.

"I'll try to get you ... as close as I can. Shuttle bay doors ... already open."

"Thank you, Captain. And for what's worth. I am truly sorry."

She uttered a little laugh. "Sure you are."

She heard the turbolift doors opening and closing behind her but couldn't find the strength to turn and look. Not that it mattered much. She had done everything she could. Whatever happened next was up to Frobisher. And she didn't even know what it was he could do. All she knew for certain was that it was over for her. For her ship and her crew and maybe even for everything else.

She forced herself to stay conscious for two more minutes during which *Agamemnon* shot passed the initial anomaly they had detected. Sensors had failed by that time and she couldn't tell if Frobisher had gotten to his ship and managed to depart or not.

When she looked back up at the screen, all she could see was a washed-out emptiness.

The galaxy war tearing itself apart.

"And this could have been such a beautiful day."

## Epilogue: Where Do the Children Play, Part 2

**May 2376**

It had been two weeks since *Eagle* had first arrived at Earth and both shore leave and crucial system overhauls necessitated by continuous battle duty during the last two war years were slowly coming to an end.

It had been almost as long since his father had passed and his funeral and Michael Owens still felt the emptiness within him that he had not thought possible considering his troubled relationship with the man who had, at best, been an absentee father to him for most of his life. He wasn't sure if he was more shocked by his sudden death or by the way it had affected him.

DeMara Deen, who had experienced her own personal losses over the last few months—even so she claimed that they were not comparable to his own—had possibly framed it best. She wasn't a trained counselor and nearly half his age and yet her wisdom and insight never failed to surprise him. No matter how much he had disagreed with his late father over the years, she had said, and no matter how much he had blamed him for his failings, he had always held out a grain of hope that one day he would fully reconcile with him, and that they would move past the feelings of bitterness and guilt both of them seemed to have harbored.

And there had certainly been evidence of this over the years as it looked more and more likely that real conciliation was indeed a possibility and that all it truly required was time.

Time that had run out

It was impossible to think that his decision to turn down his unexpected offer had somehow brought on Jonathan Owens' sudden demise. After all, the doctors had assured him that his father had been unwell for some time now.

And yet Michael couldn't entirely free himself of the notion that he had been in part responsible for what had happened to his father — that if he had just said yes to his request, he might still be alive.

He understood the inherently dangerous road that kind of thinking would lead him down and he had tried very hard to keep his mind preoccupied with other matters. One of them was *Eagle*'s next mission and he expected to receive their marching orders shortly. The rumor mill had it that *Eagle* had been chosen to take part in Starfleet's post-war plans to rekindle its original charter of deep-space exploration.

Michael couldn't think of a better mission for his ship and crew after what they had been through. If the rumors turned out to be true, there was much to do to get ready for an excursion that could quite possibly mean that they would spend years away from the core worlds.

A great many tasks and decisions would have to be made. One of them had brought him and DeMara Deen down to deck six.

Michael had not missed that the usually bubbly and outspoken Deen had been more introverted as of late. He knew that her own tragedy of seeing her close Academy friend, turned Starfleet Marine, practically die in her arms had greatly affected her but it also seemed to him that her recent reunion with her uncle on Earth had not turned out to be the joyful experience he had hoped it be. She had come back from that encounter much more pensive than he would have expected and she had yet to open up to him about why it had left her so shaken.

He had been determined not to push her on this and give her whatever time she needed before she felt comfortable sharing her thoughts with him.

She did, however, wear a little smile while they were walking down the corridor, looking much more like her usual self, even if he knew that there was more brewing under the surface.

"I'm really looking forward to this," she said and Michael was glad that her spirits were lifted even if just for the short term.

He nodded. "I think it will do us all some good," he said. "It wasn't an easy decision to tell you the truth. I can certainly see both arguments but at the end of the day, I think this is what this crew wanted the most."

"What we need as well," she said in quick agreement. "A little spark of light after the long spell of darkness we have been drowning in over the last couple of years."

"And I understand that they couldn't wait to come back, which is very heartening, considering all the terrible news they must have been exposed to over that time."

"I think it makes us all better, more complete," she said and then stopped when she saw a set of doors parting up ahead.

A throng of people was emerging from the transporter room, many of whom were wearing civilian clothing and among the men and women were also quite a few children of all ages who were quickly filling the corridor with the sounds of laughter and joy.

Deen's smile widened and it was infectious. It had been a long time since he had heard the sound of children filling *Eagle*'s corridors.

"Dee!" A human girl of perhaps seven or eight years had spotted the Tenarian and was racing down the corridor toward her. Another child, a boy who was noticeably shorter, and a few years younger, was close on her heels, clearly just as excited.

"Cora, Chase," she said, taking a knee to brace herself for their stormy approach, her smile once again as big and as brilliant as Michael remembered it from their pre-war days.

The girl won the impromptu race down the corridor, beating her brother by a few seconds and hugging Deen tightly before Chase joined her a moment later.

"We missed you," Cora said.

"I missed you, too," she said as she slowly freed herself from their embrace and then looked them both over. "It's not been the same without you two around. And look at how much you have both grown." She considered Chase for a moment. "You must be at least twenty-six by now."

The boy gave her a sheepish grin. "No, I'm six," he said and stuck out both hands indicating the years with his fingers.

"Not possible," said Deen and then looked at Michael. "Can't be right, can it?"

The captain shrugged. "We may need to get Commander Xylion down here to verify this."

Chase's eyes lit up to that, demonstrating an ongoing fascination with Vulcans and all things science that even two years away from *Eagle* had clearly not diminished.

"He will need to wait until I get my lessons," said Cora determinedly as she looked at Deen. "I studied everything I could on operations, I even took extra classes in computer science at school. I got an A last week."

"A minus," her brother teased her.

Cora shoved her brother dismissively. "Whatever," she said and turned back to Deen. "My teacher said I would make a great operations officer. Everyone in my class was really impressed with what you taught me." The pride in her body language was impossible to miss, as was the way she clearly adored Deen.

"Looks like there'll be somebody gunning for your job soon," said Michael with a smirk.

But before either Deen or Cora could respond, a commotion down the corridor up ahead caught everyone's attention. A few of the civilians and regular crewmembers, including no doubt the children's parents had still been mingling around just outside the transporter room when the doors had parted again and another group of new arrivals emerged.

And they couldn't have been any more different. The first person to come through was a tall, muscular human with a perfectly bald head and full, almost shaggy red beard that was a rare sight these days and likely not exactly in line with grooming regulations for Starfleet officers. He didn't wear a standard uniform but was most assuredly not a civilian either, judging by the intense look in his eyes. He wore a big backpack that Michael thought was shaped very much like it contained several rather large weapons.

And even though it was clear this man had never set foot on *Eagle* before, the newcomer required all but a second to find his bearings and then move on down the corridor, pushing himself past the small crowd and continuing with a purposeful pace.

He was followed almost immediately by a woman who stood nearly as tall as he had, and thanks to her sleeveless vest was showing off muscles that must have rivaled his. She had a severe buzz-cut, dark skin, and the same intense look in her eyes, as well as a similar bag strapped to her back.

Behind her, a fierce-looking Nausicaan who was even taller than both of the humans stepped out of the transporter room. Then came a short and yet somehow no less dangerous and gruff Tellarite as well as a procession of five more men and women of various races, some of whom wore either parts of Starfleet uniforms or were clad in strictly civilian attire. All would have looked more at home on a mercenary vessel than on a ship of the line. Carrying heavy weapons cases, every single one of them seemed like the kind of man or woman who could not only stand their own in a fight, they'd more than likely be the ones who'd finish one.

They paid little attention to the startled looks they received from the crewmembers and children they passed and who understandingly gave them a wide berth as they strode down the corridor in a single file.

Their leader gave Michael a very curt nod as he walked by, hardly even slowing down. "Sir."

Cora had moved closer to Deen as she watched the procession pass them by but her little brother had been less brave and had moved to try and partially hide behind her legs.

No other words were exchanged until the entire nine-man team had disappeared down the corner. Michael thought he could almost sense a collective sense of relief once they were gone.

"I guess you've decided on a compromise," DeMara finally said, still looking down the corridor and referring to the options he had mulled over of either bringing back the civilians who had left *Eagle* once the war had broken out or keeping the marine detachment onboard that had come to replace them.

He nodded. "Laas made some good points and was very persuasive. She believes that a Special Missions Team will be a perfect addition to her security squad and just the kind of specialized unit to continue to ensure the safety of this ship and crew considering the challenges we're likely to face in this post-war galaxy."

"I'm not sure if I should be relieved or worried," she said.

Michael had no response to offer. The truth was he wasn't entirely sure himself. It wasn't commonplace for Starfleet ships to carry an SMT unit, which as the name suggested was usually only deployed in specific circumstances and when a certain level of decisive or clandestine force was required. It didn't exactly align with

his vision of what Starfleet should be, but then again, he'd had similar reservations when he had signed off on bringing on board the marines two years earlier. Now he was certain that his crew would most likely not have survived the war without them.

He couldn't help but hope that this changed galaxy they lived in now would not force him to rely in the same way on a team of people who for all intents and purposes appeared to be made up of natural-born killers.

He also knew that after all they had been through, he couldn't afford not to have them around at all.

"Times are changing, Dee, and we'll have to change with them," he said but didn't say to her what was truly on his mind. After his father's dire warnings, he was worried about what the future might bring.

And he wasn't so sure if this latest move was going to be enough to prepare them for it.

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