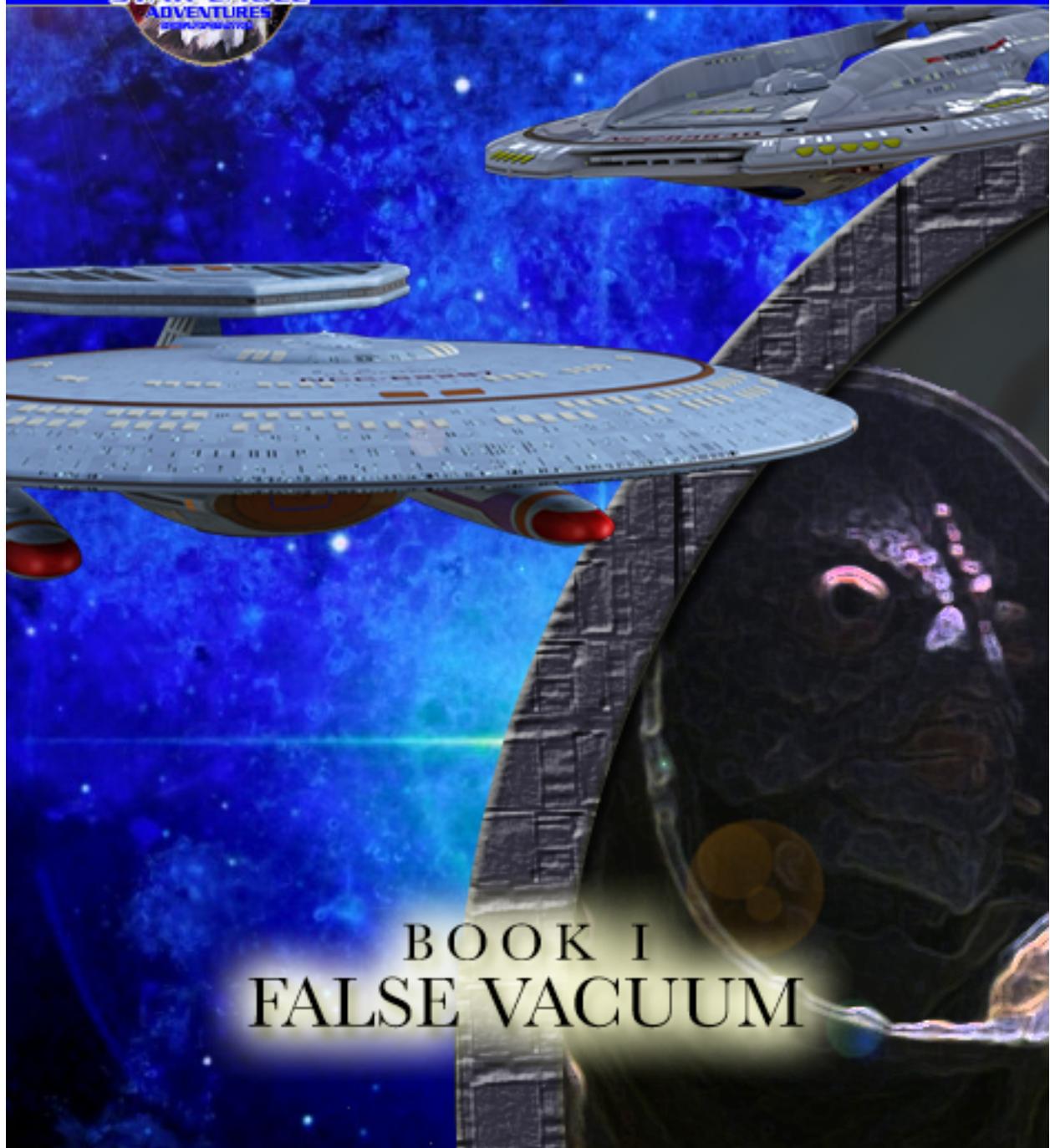


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BOOK I  
FALSE VACUUM

**QUANTUM DIVERGENCE**

B O O K O N E  
FALSE VACUUM  
**QUANTUM DIVERGENCE**  
**THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES #7**  
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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## Somewhere, Somewhen

All of reality was dying.

That much had already been determined. The equations and calculations simply could not allow for any other conclusion. To deny this simple fact was tantamount to denying the existence of reality itself.

And the study of reality was their entire *raison d'être*, their paramount purpose, and their most sacred of responsibilities.

Perhaps it had been different once. Before such considerations as the past, the present, and the future had warranted separate and altogether different avenues of thought and philosophy. But once those distinctions had been left behind and deemed irrelevant when contemplating the total sum of reality, considered as too much of an impediment to fully comprehending and appreciating everything that was, is, and ever will be, once they had reached that next stage of cognitive evolution, their duty had become inescapably clear.

And who was there to say otherwise?

In the age before this one, when linear thoughts about time and space had still prevailed, there had been other voices alongside their own. There had been such a time when life had been abundant within reality.

Long before the great leap forward, before the vast obligation to all of the meta-universe had even played a role in their thoughts, there had been galaxies and stars and planets on which other beings toiled their daily lives away. And they had reached out to many of those, even if their inferiority had never been in question. There had been a community once, spreading across the galactic hemispheres.

Not anymore.

Other life had simply run its course over the millennia. Stars and entire galaxies had come and gone while at the same time they had grown and spread and evolved until they were all that remained across the universe.

And once all of the cosmos was explored and understood and all thought and contemplation on a single universe had been fully and entirely exhausted, it was only natural to look beyond those

feeble borders and seek out a purpose within the infinity of not just their universe but within all of reality.

It was just around that time when the mere concept of time itself lost its consequence.

And it was shortly thereafter – if one insisted on thinking about it all in linear terms, which they had of course long since abandoned – that they had arrived at their ineludible supposition as to the ultimate fate of all of existence.

It is, it will and it has always been dying.

And it can be changed.

But to do so, something drastic has to be done, something that in all of the endlessness of reality, in the countless number of universes had never been attempted or possibly even considered.

It must end and it must commence anew.

*But what if there is a different way?* A voice asked.

This in itself was peculiar since discord and disagreement were not something they engaged in. The conclusion, after all, had been accepted as an inevitability as certain as that stars were born and died.

*Perhaps, the voice said, the conclusions are correct. Perhaps, the voice said, the solution is not.*

But this too seemed inconceivable.

The end of reality was assured. Everything would perish, including those who had taken on the obligation to guard reality itself. This could not be allowed.

The vastness of reality does not permit half-measures or minor corrections to the flow of things.

No, such attempts, born out of ignorance and incompetence, attempting to corrupt the natural balance of space – and yes, also of time – have only weakened and accelerated the ultimate demise of all things. Small-minded beings in countless universes, unwilling, but first and foremost, incapable of fully comprehending the impact of their reckless actions by meddling with the delicate fabric of space and time which holds all of the meta-universe together have also, inadvertently, led to its doom.

It was fully understood that the workings of linear time can be safely disregarded when it is a hindrance to appreciating the full scope of reality. However, it mustn't ever be perverted in the manner

it has been, by using it as if it were nothing more than a tool, an inconvenient barrier that can be broken down and rearranged at will with enough force and determination.

*Within those simple and inferior minds, the voice said, hundreds of millennia will come and go before reality will even begin to bend to such an extent that it will eventually break beyond all repair.*

Such thoughts were not germane to deliberations taking place outside of time, without beginning or end. The fates of lower beings, of single galaxies or even universes, simply warranted no consideration when fulfilling the enormous responsibility of ensuring the endurance of the entirety of everything.

*All that can be seen, has been seen, the other voices said. All that is, all that has come to pass and all that will come to pass has been seen, has been considered, has been understood.*

*The fate of reality is incontrovertible.*

*The panacea has been determined.*

*And dissension is proscribed.*

So the voice was no longer heard.

**Stardate: 53364.5**  
**(June 2376 CE)**

# Prologue: Anything Goes

## 1

She stepped out of the darkness with slow but determined steps, exuding a kind of confidence that could have easily been called alluring.

The effect was without a doubt only enhanced by the elegant, crimson evening gown she wore and which sparkled brightly under the spotlight as if it was covered in diamonds.

The dress, of course, wasn't the only reason she commanded attention. It would have been difficult not to take notice of her golden locks flowing over her perfect shoulders or those intense and gleaming purple eyes focused on no one, accompanied by a smile that seemed to speak to everyone.

She just stood there a moment, moving hardly a muscle as if she was the center of reality itself, allowing the universe to gaze at her and her magnificent beauty and be in awe.

Then the up-tempo, jazzy tune began and it had her quickly snapping her fingers in perfect rhythm as her smile widened. When she began to sing, her voice was low and husky but no less alluring than her appearance:

*"Times have changed,  
And we've often rewound the clock,  
Since the Puritans got a shock,  
When they landed on Plymouth Rock.  
But today,  
Any shock they would try to stem,  
'Stead of landing on Plymouth Rock,  
Plymouth Rock would land on them."*

She took a quick step forward in line with the song's diminuendo to reveal one of her long, bare legs through the almost provocative slit running up her dress, and just before the music swelled once more with the brass instruments kicking in.

*"In olden days a glimpse of stocking  
Was looked on as something shocking,  
But now, God knows,  
Anything Goes."*

As the music picked up, she too became more active, beginning to pace the stage, her smile turning into a wide and bemused grin.

*"Good authors too who once knew better words,  
Now only use four letter words,  
Writing prose.  
Anything Goes."*

*The world's gone mad today,  
And good's bad today,  
And black's white today,  
And day's night today,  
When most guys today,  
That women prize today,  
Are just silly gigolos.*

*Though I'm no great romancer  
I know that you're bound to answer  
When I propose,  
Anything Goes.*

*When grandmama whose age is eighty  
In night clubs is getting matey with gigolos,  
Anything Goes.*

*When mothers pack and leave poor father  
Because they decide they'd rather be tennis pros,  
Anything Goes.*

*If driving fast cars you like,  
If low bars you like,  
If bare limbs you like,*

*If Mae West you like,  
Or me undressed you like,  
To molest at night,  
Nobody will oppose!  
When every night,  
The set that's smart,  
Is indulging in nudist parties in studios,  
Anything Goes."*

The elegant red dress came off her with a quick tug, revealing a skimpy white and blue bathing suit she was wearing underneath even while the stage was being invaded from all sides by cheering male and female dances, all dressed in naval-inspired costumes.

The music once more sped up and the group of dancers quickly fell into line with the singer remaining center stage and together, they broke out into an elaborate tap-dancing routine that had them flying all over the stage, the rhythmically tapping sounds of their shoes complimenting the song flawlessly.

For a full five minutes, legs and arms were swinging left and right, there were twists, spins, jumps, shuffles, and kicks every which way, all while staying in perfect tempo with the music and tapping away in concert.

The big number concluded with the singer being picked up by two large men and being thrown clear a few meters up in the air, only to be caught easily just above the stage where she continued to pantomime the tap dance in midair for a brief while until her shoes made contact with the stage once more and she finished the dance with an increasingly faster set of moves as if in direct competition with her background dancers.

The music cut out and for a moment, all that could be heard were the rhythmic taps of a dozen dance shoes moving in unison until every last dancer froze on the stage in mid-step.

Then the entire group began breaking up again, cheering loudly while the singer roamed back and forth in-between the dancers, playfully kissing a few of them on the cheek.

The music began anew and the group jerked forward to continue their song in a loud and rapid chorus:

*“Just think of those shocks you've got  
And those knocks you've got  
And those blues you've got  
From those news you've got  
And what pains you've got  
If any brains you've got  
From those little radios.”*

She continued solo for the next verse as she returned center stage and the dancers arranged themselves around her.

*“They think he's gangster number one, so they've made him  
The favorite son, and that goes to show.”*

The chorus stepped back as she moved forward and they belted out the final lines of the song together.

*“Anything Goes!  
Anything, Anything, Anything Goes!”*

The act ended to modest applause from the small number of spectators and the exhausted performers took deep breaths as they congratulated each other.

Michael Owens continued to applaud as the singer walked over to him. He offered DeMara Deen a beaming smile and then quickly passed her a towel which she gratefully took off his hands. “Bravo. That was one breathtaking number.”

She returned his smile as she began to wipe the sweat off her face and arms. “Breathtaking is right,” she said, still drawing big gulps of much-needed air after her performance. “But I still think we're going slightly out of sync in the third verse.”

“Well, if you did, I certainly couldn't tell. And I'm sure nobody in the audience will either when you perform this in the concert next week.”

She shook her head. “I'm not so certain. We have enough Vulcans on board who are quite sensitive to this kind of thing. They're known to have a very acute sense of rhythm,” she said and hung the towel over her bare shoulder.

"Something tells me this type of performance may not exactly be in their wheelhouse," Michael said and handed her a bottle of water next.

She took that one too. "I don't see why not."

"I for one don't recall Cole Porter being quite so racy."

She gulped down the water and then pinned him with a scowl. "You call this racy?"

He looked her up and down.

"Oh please, so I'm showing a little bit of skin. What's wrong with that?"

"I didn't say that there was anything wrong with it."

"Right. You just would've preferred if I had stuck to that Rossini aria you've been talking about, wearing a stuffy costume Earth women used to wear five hundred years ago. I told you, I don't have that kind of range."

But Michael Owens disagreed. While he had known DeMara Deen since she had been a child and had never really considered her a singer, he and the rest of *Eagle's* crew had been pleasantly surprised to discover just a year earlier that she had an amazingly beautiful, not to mention powerful singing voice when she had performed a small part in another shipboard performance. She had also turned out to be incredibly versatile, something she had clearly already demonstrated while performing an old Broadway standard that required her to simultaneously execute a challenging dance routine.

"I think you would have made a great Zelmira," he said. "I've heard you hit some of those high notes and I'm still convinced you'd be a fabulous coloratura soprano if you applied yourself."

"Not everybody shares your fondness for Earth opera, Michael."

"Plenty of people do. And if you gave it a try, I think you could really move people with your voice instead of getting a rise out of them by ripping your clothes off," he said and regretted those words the moment they had come over his lips and he saw the darkening frown on her face.

"That's what this is really about, isn't it?" she said, her voice taking on a sharper edge. "You don't like seeing me this way. Michael, I'm not a child anymore."

He quickly shook his head, trying to dispel any notion that that's how he still saw her. "Of course not. But you have to admit that this isn't you."

"Why not?" she said pointedly, demanding an answer.

And he didn't have one.

"Because it doesn't fit the image you have of me?" she said, answering her own question. "Because you and many others have come to expect me to look and behave in a certain way and if I do anything that doesn't fit that mold, I'm suddenly no longer myself? But that's not true. I'm still DeMara Deen. I'm still that same person you first met when you visited my planet all those years ago. But I'm also older and there is more than one side to me."

"I'm not denying any of that, Dee."

She crossed her arms in front of her. "I think sometimes you have a hard time seeing me as anything other than that small girl I once was. Like a little sister you need to protect or worse, as the daughter you've never had and for whom you are responsible. I don't need a father figure in my life, Michael. I would think of all people, you would understand that."

Those words hit harder than he would have expected.

Deen, of course, knew well of his troubled relationship with his father which had mostly been the result of early childhood neglect that he had overcompensated for in later years by getting heavily involved in his life and particularly his career.

He had never been able to confirm or deny those rumors to his own satisfaction and now he would never get the chance since Jonathan Owens had recently passed away suddenly and just days after Michael had visited him on Earth.

Deen winced ever so slightly as if she had realized that perhaps she had aimed a little too low but then quickly shook it off as she apparently moved passed it. She returned the towel and the water bottle to him. "We still have plenty of rehearsals to do here and little time until the premiere."

He nodded. "Of course. For what it's worth, I still think it will be a rousing success."

"Thanks," she said, but her smile wasn't quite as brilliant as it had been before. She turned back toward the stage to confer with her performers and crew.

Michael watched her for a moment longer before he dropped off what he was holding and left *Eagle's* cargo bay that had been converted into a rehearsal stage for the upcoming performances which would be put on once *Eagle* had finished its current assignment. He was unable to completely shake her words and the conflicting feelings they had aroused within him.

## 2

Piquis VII was an unremarkable world by any measure of significance. Located at the outer edge of the Krellonian Star Alliance, it was far removed from the center of power and culture of the core worlds. It had been settled by Krellonians nearly two hundred years earlier, at the very height of the expansionist wave that had driven the people of Krellon to spread their sphere of influence over their neighboring systems. It had been an unbreakable devotion to a divine destiny that had fueled their drive to conquer the stars and which had ultimately resulted in the creation of an empire forged by brutal conquest and the enslavement of races considered inferior and in desperate need of the steady and firm guidance of a people preordained to rule the galaxy by the Infallible Creator.

That religious fervor had of course long since passed and was considered an archaic byproduct of a past age by most present-day Krellonians. Slavery, too, had been abolished and its mere existence once upon a time was but a historic blemish best left forgotten least it evoked a sense of guilt and shame within the descendants of those who had allowed those atrocities to be perpetrated.

And Piquis VII which had once been a prosperous outpost of the Star Alliance, thanks to the mineral abundance of the system's asteroid belt that helped sustain a resource-hungry empire, had also become part of the past when those rich deposits had finally been exhausted after decades of unrelenting extraction efforts.

The planet's generally inhospitable surface had never made it an attractive prospect for anything other than a massive ore-refining

operation and the inevitable growth of industrial and commercial interests that came with a prosperity firmly linked to the local mining trade.

Once that had dried-up, many had left to seek their fortunes elsewhere rather than stay behind on a diminishing and bleak world without much of a future. What remained were a handful of crumbling population centers, made up of a very small amount of influential families who had accumulated their wealth through their old industries, a sizeable but increasingly poor class of administrators, and a much larger number of Outlanders, Krellonian subject races, former slaves who had eventually become the cheap labor force toiling in the mines.

For most, leaving Piquis was an unaffordable impossibility, even if work was hard to come by these days. Piquis had always been a far-flung corner outpost of the Star Alliance. Traveling toward the core worlds was expansive and leaving the Alliance altogether was almost impossible. Beyond the Piquis system, the galaxy opened up into the star-jammed region of the Amargosa Diaspora, a stellar nursery so dense, that it made navigation not just difficult but outright dangerous. And somewhere beyond all those bright stars was the home of another empire few within Krellon space knew or cared much about. A place called the Federation.

Garla looked out of the viewport of her personal yacht to take in the dull, brownish-red planet her ship was approaching and not without a tinge of dread.

After all, as far as she was concerned, Piquis VII epitomized everything that was wrong with the Krellon Star Alliance, and as a woman who greatly cared for her people and their future, she found it difficult not to look at this world without appreciating the nearly insurmountable problems they were all facing.

It took only a moment for a sense of swelling hope to replace her dreary concerns. Things were going to change, and soon. After much hard work, they had now finally entered into the final and most crucial stages of making the most radically sweeping changes to the very fabric of Krellonian society that would promise to forever alter her people's destiny for the better.

It was the very reason she had come to this backwater world, far removed from the prying eyes of the ineffective government and

military forces on the homeworld. This then was the perfect place to turn those dreams she had chased since childhood finally into reality.

Her reverie of a more glorious and perfect future was interrupted by the sound of an incoming message from the computer console in her quarters.

She tore herself away from the viewport and swiftly walked over to the console to learn who was trying to contact her now. She frowned when she identified the sender.

It was one of those very same ineffective government officials she had tried to leave behind in the capital. As a Sentinel of the Eye of Krellon, the most powerful security and intelligence agency within the Alliance, she had far-reaching authority and autonomy in all her work and was mostly free to tend to her business with very limited oversight. But it also meant that as much as she may have despised the current policies of her government after all was said and done, she was still beholden to them. Along with the Star Navy, the Eye was the principal instrument of government power and influence in the Alliance, and as such, she was obligated to answer enquires of any member of the Central Council promptly and with little delay.

Garla canceled the incoming message.

She was in no mood to speak to that particular council member and she could always justify her actions later by claiming interference or a system failure. It was unlikely that Yorlo would believe any of this but it was even less likely that her estranged husband would make a formal complaint that his wife wouldn't take his calls or go as far as involving the paramount – the leader of the council, and de facto ruler of the Star Alliance – directly.

Another warning sound alerted her to their impending descent into Piquis VII's atmosphere and Garla sat down in her chair and strapped herself in. She had made this trip more than enough times to know that the strong gales sweeping across the surface of her destination at this time of year would make for a turbulent approach.

Her interstellar corvette crewed by three loyal Eye officers bounced and rocked predictably as it raced towards the planet's capital and the most populous city surrounded by the cold and dull tundra of the Southern hemisphere.

Glancing back out of the viewport, Garla watched as the clouds gave way to the sight of the city below with its modest skyline at its

center and the sprawl of old habitats and large, mostly abandoned industrial zones surrounding it.

Her ship was heading straight for one of those skyscrapers at the city's center, not the tallest – that would have been too conspicuous for a regional headquarter of the Eye – and she could see the large and sharply angled glass roof of the building parting to reveal the landing bay ensconced within it just before the sight dropped out of view.

The ship landed with a thud and Garla had released the constraints and jumped out of her chair the moment she had felt the touchdown. She grabbed her already prepared briefcase and hurried for the exit ramp to finally set foot on Piquis after her two-week journey from the homeworld, thankful to finally be breathing non-recycled air again, even if it was much cooler than she was comfortable with.

She observed for a moment as the deck crew quickly approached her ship to secure the vessel, unload any cargo, and promptly refuel it in case a speedy departure was called for. Above her, the darkly tinted, synthetic-glass roof sealed tightly once more to safely hide the innards of this secretive facility.

As was the case in many places within the Alliance, the more menial and laborious tasks were performed by Outlanders. The deck crew looking after her ship was made up of three green-scaled reptilian Zel, two, large-bodied and dark-furred ursine Buoth, and a petite, humanoid Kridrip while the officer in charge was a bulky, middle-aged Krellonian who from all appearances didn't believe in exposing himself to much physical exercise.

He also, Garla noticed, didn't seem to believe that his workers were performing their tasks with enough motivation.

"I want this ship fully secured and prepared for lift-off on the double. No more of that poky Outlander pace you have been passing off for work around here lately. It's no trouble at all for me to replace every last one of you with a crew that actually knows the meaning of hard work, do you read me?"

His little speech seemed to spur on his small troop but also made one of the Zel noticeably nervous and in his haste to attach a refueling conduit, it slipped out of his three-clawed hand, causing liquid fuel to spill onto the deck.

“Infallible Creator, preserve me,” the supervisor fumed as he waddled over to the fuel control station to engage the shut-off valve. “How did I end up with the most useless bunch of Outties this side of the Galactic Divide?” Once the fuel leak was contained, he hurried over to the still startled Zel and harshly yanked him backward with enough force that he went flying onto the deck. The supervisor didn't afford him a second look and instead took in the sight of the spill. “Look what a mess you've made. This will all be deducted from your pay. And you remain here until every last drop of this has been cleaned up.”

Garla joined the supervisor by his side and the rotund man glanced up at her, startled for a moment that she had managed to approach him without him even noticing. “Sentinel, I am so very sorry for this. It's these rotten Outlanders. Some of them are damn-near useless with those moronic claws they have for hands.”

She looked back at the Zel who was slowly being helped up by his fellow reptilians and then nodded. “Would it not help avoid these kinds of incidents if you were to assign them tasks more befitting their skill sets?”

He snorted a laugh at that. “What skill sets? One is worse than the other.”

“I see. If your workers are not sufficiently qualified for this work, perhaps you should consider hiring a different workforce.”

The supervisor considered her for a moment, clearly not used to a high-ranking sentinel such as Garla concerning herself with such low-level personnel decisions. “It would be challenging to find qualified Krellonian workers at the pay that we can offer. There is also the matter of the quotas we need to fill to employ Outties.”

Garla nodded. “I understand.”

He looked back at the spill and Garla followed suit. “It's a real mess but it is what it is.”

“For now, yes,” she almost whispered.

He aimed her a quizzical look, clearly not having fully perceived her words.

Garla waved him off and then made to walk away. Then, as if she had remembered something, she turned back to the supervisor.

“What is your name?”

“Veetu, ma'am.”

“Veetu,” she repeated and nodded. “You realize, of course, that it is a criminal offense to physically assault an Outlander?” She didn’t allow him to respond and instead bestowed him with a look so steely, he couldn’t suppress an involuntary gulp. “I ever hear you laying a hand on another worker again, I will ensure you will never work for a government agency ever again.”

She promptly turned on her heel and strode away before he even had a chance to think about a possible reply.

Another Kridrip, almost a full head shorter than Garla and with delicately braided long hair and large eyes, came rushing through the heavy doors of the landing deck even while Garla was heading towards him.

Clutching a data padd in both hands as if his life depended on what it contained, he surveyed the scene of the stunned supervisor next to the fuel leak surrounded by the Outlander deck crew for just the briefest of moments before he glanced at Garla striding in his direction, offering her an exasperated look. “My sincerest apologies for the delay, Sentinel, I’ve been held up by unexpected developments.”

Garla simply shrugged, took the slate off him in passing, and continued through the now open exit without so much as slowing down. “That’s quite alright, Tenn.”

“I hope you had a ... uh ... pleasant journey,” he said, still seemingly distracted by whatever commotion had transpired before his arrival but recovered quickly enough to follow her through the doors and into the elevator.

“As pleasant as can be cooped up in a small ship for days on end,” she said as she glanced over the padd Tenn had passed her.

He nodded as he entered their destination into the control panel following which the lift immediately began its descent. “Is there anything that I should know regarding the landing bay crew?”

Garla shook her head. “Just a case of an overzealous supervisor, nothing to worry about,” she said and then looked up at her assistant. “You mentioned an unexpected development. What is it? I don’t see anything in my brief.”

“Yes,” he said. “I was only just informed so I have not yet been able to update it, I’m afraid. Chief Administrator Chella arrived a short while ago and insists on speaking with you.”

Garla sighed. "Speaking of overzealous supervisors. Must be something in the atmosphere here. What does she want?"

The doors of the lift opened to deposit them on the floor Garla's office was located on.

Tenn followed her closely. "She didn't declare her intentions to me, however, there have been some ... concerns in the city and beyond over the last few weeks. I wouldn't be surprised if she wishes to discuss those."

It wasn't a very long walk to her office where Garla deposited her briefcase on her large desk. "Security concerns?"

"Medical concerns."

This came as a surprise to her.

"I have advised Administrator Chella that you would not be available to see visitors today but she was quite insistent to speak with you. If you wish I can have her removed from the building."

Garla smirked at the thought. "As tempting as that may sound, forcefully removing a planetary administrator from a central government facility may invite the wrong kind of attention."

"Of course. I shall see her in then. Also, you have an urgent message from Councilmember –"

"Yorlo?"

"The same."

She nodded. "He can wait. He may have significantly more clout within the halls of power, but he's less likely to appear uninvited on our doorstep if we let him stew a little. Anything else before I meet with Chella?"

"You asked to get a personal status update from the site supervisors at the facility. All three of them have since arrived and are waiting to meet you in person."

"Very good," she said as she took a seat behind her desk. "I'll meet with them once I'm done with Chella. Considering how far behind schedule we have fallen; they have much explaining to do."

"Indeed," Tenn said with a sharp nod and then left to fetch her guest.

Garla contemplated the unexpected meeting for a moment. Chella was a typical local leader, high-strung and over-preoccupied with issues she had no immediate control over. As a sentinel working for the Eye, Garla wasn't required to involve local officials in any

decisions or projects she was involved in even if said projects were situated within their jurisdiction. She had found it helpful in the past to try and keep on good terms with the locals but the latitude she was willing to extend only went so far. The project was far too important to be endangered because of a mid-level politician who was sore about somebody else playing in her pond.

“Chief Administrator,” Garla greeted the woman as she was shown into her office, maintaining an easy smile that was meant to communicate to the other woman that the moment she had stepped into this building she had surrendered all the control she would have taken for granted outside of those walls. The slightly pained expression on the administrator’s face seemed to indicate that she understood this. “Welcome. I must say, however, I was not aware that I had made my travel arrangements public knowledge,” Garla added.

Chella walked up to her desk and offered a nod in greeting. “I like to keep track of the arrival of important officials to Piquis wherever I can.”

“I see,” said Garla and stood to be at eye level with the other woman. They were both about the same age – for Garla it was a matter of professional pride to know everything there was to know about a possible political adversary – but thanks to Garla’s strict fitness regimen, she was clearly in much better shape and could pass far more easily as a woman a decade younger than she truly was, whereas Chella very much looked her middle-age. Perhaps her much lighter skin and her entirely hairless head, both common characteristics for Krellonians who had grown up on Piquis, attributed to this, as well as the fact that Chella had borne a child whereas Garla had not. “If I were a paranoid person, I would fear that you are keeping track of my movements,” she said. And, of course, she was a paranoid person, had to be, considering her occupation, and she was pretty certain that Chella was doing exactly as she had suggested.

“I am a busy person. I have far more important matters to concern myself with.”

“So I would hope. I take it one of those matters has brought you to my office today.”

She nodded. “There is a growing concern that Piquis has been targeted by an Outlander terrorist attack.”

This was news to her and a very serious accusation. "What kind of an attack?"

"Biological. There has been an outbreak of a yet-to-be-identified illness in this city that has been spreading quickly."

"And what makes you think it is an attack?"

Chella allowed herself a minuscule smile, clearly not because she enjoyed the news she was sharing but more likely because she seemed to possess information a Sentinel of the Eye, a spymaster for all intense and purpose, had not yet learned. The administrator was clearly relishing the feeling of momentary superiority this afforded her. "So far only Krellonians have been affected by this illness. There hasn't been a single reported case of an Outlander contracting whatever this is. My investigators are fairly certain it is a targeted attack, likely using an artificially engineered virus of sorts."

"But you have no evidence of this?"

She shook her head.

"Then perhaps, Chief Administrator, it is too early to jump to such conclusions. The physiology of all the Outlander races is significantly different from our own. It even varies to a great degree amongst the Outlanders themselves. It may be that they are just immune to this illness."

"It is possible but Outlander unrest is at an all-time high on Piquis. It stands to reason that this is just the latest in a long string of terrorist activity orchestrated by their ringleaders."

Garla wanted to argue that perhaps the systematic violence perpetrated by Chella's own security forces against Outlanders was part of the problem. But even she had to admit that the matter went much deeper than that. Racial tensions had been a problem for the Alliance for centuries and it had only been getting worse over the last few decades. A real change was needed and soon before the tinderbox that was the fragile state of Alliance society would finally explode and put them all on a path they would not be able to turn back from.

It was no longer even a hypothetical concern. Garla had seen it happen and was determined to do whatever was necessary to avoid it.

"There have also been rumors," Chella continued when Garla kept her thoughts to herself, "that whatever activities the Eye is

involved in on Piquis may have contributed to the spread of this illness.”

Garla shot the other woman a look sharp enough it could have cut steel. It had the intended effect and Chella lost her composure for a brief moment. “I sincerely hope that such rumors are not propagated in any way through your office, Chief Administrator.”

Chella took on an air of surprise. Garla couldn’t tell if it was honest or put on. “Of course not. I would never suggest such a thing. I understand that the Eye’s primary concern is the wellbeing of the Krellonian people.”

“Of the entire Alliance,” Garla corrected.

Chella nodded as if that was one and the same. “If you were able to cooperate with my investigators by sharing some of the details – “

“Thank you for bringing this situation to my attention,” Garla said sharply and sat back down, avoiding eye contact. “You can rest assured that I will be looking into this further. May the Infallible Creator bless the remainder of your day.”

The other woman remained glued to the spot for a moment longer, as if not entirely sure, or perhaps not able to believe that she had been dismissed so brusquely, considering her station. “And ... yours as well, Sentinel,” she finally said before heading out the door.

Tenn appeared in her stead just moments after she had left.

Garla spoke even while she continued to look contemplatively into the distance. “This health situation. How come I am only learning about this now?”

“It has been kept pretty quiet by the administrator’s office. It has only become news over the last few hours and while you were still in transit.”

Garla shook her head. “That’s not good enough. We should have known about this at the same time the administrator did. In fact, we should have known before.”

“You are correct, of course, my apologies, Sentinel.”

She looked up at him. "It's hardly your fault Tenn, you are my assistant, not an agent working for the Eye. But clearly, the people in this building have not been doing their jobs properly while I was gone. Somebody will have to answer for that. I'll deal with that later."

“Understood. Do you wish to see the facility supervisors now?”

“Yes.” But before her assistant could leave the office again, she called after him. “Tenn?”

He stopped and turned to regard her once more.

“How many Outlanders work in this building?”

He needed to consider this for only a moment. “About one hundred and fifty.”

She nodded slowly as she processed this. “I want you to draft a proposal to reduce that number by eighty percent before the end of the day. All non-critical Outlander personnel is to be put on furlough until further notice.”

To his credit, he didn't hesitate. “Yes, Sentinel.”

She looked up at him. “Put yourself down as critical personnel.”

“Thank you.”

“I'll meet with the supervisors now.”

As Tenn left to organize her next meeting, Garla quietly considered what she had learned so far and the more she thought about it, the more furious it made her. She had worked too long and too hard for her plans to be undone at this juncture by a group of angry Outlanders who had decided to pick this time to vent their frustrations over the injustices they were exposed to within Piquis society.

Garla could empathize with their plight but did not condone their behavior. Not all Krellonians held on to age-old racial views that Outlanders were inferior and did not deserve the same rights as Krellonians. A blanket attack – if that was indeed what had caused this latest crisis – was entirely unacceptable and unforgivable. It was also the last thing that she could afford considering other more recent setbacks.

Tenn returned with three Krellonian supervisors, all three locals considering their shaven heads and the pale color of their skin. She recognized two of them from previous meetings right in this building or from visits to the facilities where they worked. The third man she hadn't met before in person and she was a little startled by his appearance. He looked even paler than the other two except for his nose which was clearly inflamed and his bloodshot eyes were evidence that he had not slept well in quite some time.

She stood. "I need answers. The latest reports show that we are way behind schedule even after we have ramped up production. This is simply not good enough."

The most senior of the three spoke first. "We've encountered difficulties since we lost the secondary facility. A single site simply cannot make up for the loss."

But Garla shook her head. "This was already discussed. We adjusted our production figures following the incident and I was assured that we would be able to meet the new demand and make up for the shortfall by deploying more personnel."

The second supervisor spoke next. "Personnel has been the problem."

"How so?" Garla said.

The third man shook with a nasty cough. "Apologies, Sentinel. I am Reetu Denur, I am in charge of personnel at the facility."

She nodded, she knew his name.

"Fewer and fewer people have been showing up for work over the last two weeks. At first, we thought it was merely related to a seasonal condition but we now fear that—" he had to stop himself when another coughing fit forced him to pull out a handkerchief.

The first supervisor took over. "We've been heavily relying on Outlanders to pick up the slack but we don't have nearly enough in place and considering the high-security clearance the work requires, it is unlikely we can make up the shortfall in a quick enough manner by relying on new personnel."

"Nor should we attempt it," said the second supervisor. "Not with those rumors going around that the Outlanders are to blame for this."

Garla had to agree. It was not a chance she was willing to take.

Reetu's coughing fit didn't seem to end which was beginning to grate on her nerves. "For the Creator's sake, go and get some medicine."

He looked up at her in embarrassment and nodded quickly.

"My ... apologies, yet again, Sentinel," he managed to croak between coughs and then headed for the exit. He managed two steps before he collapsed right onto the carpet.

"By the Creator, not him too," said the first supervisor who quickly knelt next to the fallen man to look him over.

“What is happening?” asked Garla but made no move to step away from behind her desk.

“It’s that illness,” said the second supervisor. “It’s been impossible to tell who has it and who just shows the symptoms.”

Tenn who Garla hadn’t even noticed leaving the room returned suddenly with another man she recognized as one of the physicians that worked for the Eye.

“Step away from that man,” the doctor practically barked at the supervisor kneeling next to the now motionless Reetu on the floor. “I need everyone to leave this room straight away.”

It was only now that Garla noticed that the physician was wearing a mask and rubber gloves. “What is it?”

The man looked up at her. “It has only just been confirmed, Sentinel. Whatever it is we are dealing with here is not just deadly. It’s highly contagious as well.”

The two other men quickly stepped away from their ailing colleague.

“Then that man needs to be isolated straight away,” said Garla.

But the doctor shook his head. “I’m afraid it’s much worse than that. Word has just reached us from the Chief Administrator’s office.”

Garla threw him a quizzical look, not fully comprehending what he was getting at.

“A planet-wide quarantine is now in effect.”

## Part One: Trust No One

### 1

Humans, he believed, referred to it as giddiness, a word that had quite a different, almost opposite meaning on Vulcan where it was most often associated with an illness and not with the obvious state of excitement he had observed in Louise Hopkins recently whenever he had visited *Eagle's* main engineering deck.

While the emotion was mostly foreign to him, he could appreciate why the chief engineer had been in such a positive mood as of late, considering that *Eagle* had just days ago completed a three-week, major systems overhaul at Earth station McKinley that most notably had led to the complete replacement of the ship's primary power plant, the matter/anti-matter drive assembly.

The new class-ten warp core was a significant improvement to *Eagle's* previous and now outdated class-eight drive which, even though upgraded and refined many times over the years could simply no longer match the newest and most advanced drive Starfleet had designed in both raw power output and performance.

"This baby is using a tricyclic input manifold, producing four thousand five hundred teradynes per second at peak efficiency and will give us a top speed of warp nine point eight five and an emergency speed of warp nine point nine six for up to six hours," said Louise Hopkins as her eyes almost reverently followed the multiple deck-high and horizontally aligned assembly.

"Any more than that and the nacelles will come flying clean off," said Lif Culsten, the ship's flight control officer who stood just next to her.

Xylion understood that the young Krellonian man had most likely meant his comment in jest. Although it was accurate to imply that *Eagle's* over twenty-year-old *Nebula*-class spaceframe would likely begin showing signs of significant stress if exceeding those speeds, there was no evidence to suggest that either of the warp nacelles, slung underneath the saucer-shaped primary hull, would physically detach themselves from the rest of the starship if exceeding maximum warp velocities.

“Still,” the silver-haired helmsman said. “I wouldn’t mind pushing her to the limits and see if we can break any speed records.”

“That seems unlikely, Lieutenant. The current warp speed record was set by the USS *Enterprise* in 2364 when assisted by the entity known as the Traveler, the vessel was able to accelerate at speeds beyond the warp scale.”

“Having some super-powered being turbo-charge the warp drive is hardly fair,” he said, throwing Hopkins a pointed look. “I’m talking about a naturally aspirated speed record. How about it?”

But the chief engineer quickly shook her head. “No dice. Not going to let you do that to my new engine, super-powered or otherwise. Besides, we’ll need to do a whole set of reconfigurations and adjustments to the injectors, the regulators, the intermix chamber, and a bunch of other components before I fully trust this thing. She may look shiny and new now and she may be behaving nicely while we’re cruising leisurely at warp six, but she won’t reveal her true character until we really let her loose. And I want to make sure she doesn’t blow up in our faces once we do.”

Culsten grinned at her. “Admit it, you’re looking forward to playing around with your new toy.”

The young engineer kept a stern visage. “I’ve spent five years fine-tuning our old engine. It’s probably going to take me just as long to get this one purring as the old one did.”

“Yeah, but you’re going to have a whale of a time doing it.”

Her stern expression broke to be replaced by a large smirk. “It’s going to be a blast.”

“The swirling is going to need some getting used to,” said DeMara Deen.

Xylion considered the Tenarian operations officer for a moment. On what was already a relatively young senior crew, Deen was by far the youngest but not necessarily the least experienced officer. She also tended to be the most high-spirited member of the senior staff, exuding optimism that he had felt on occasions bordered on what humans liked to refer to as Pollyannaism. He had not failed to observe that her usual buoyancy had been much less obvious in recent years which he attributed to the general downturn in ship morale during the Dominion War. And while Xylion, as a Vulcan dedicated to the stoic lifestyle of his people, could not claim to be a

great student of emotional intelligence, he had noticed that while the end of the war had significantly increased the general mood onboard, DeMara Deen's recovery had appeared much slower than what he would have expected from her.

She was, of course, entirely correct in her remark that due to the tricyclic nature of the class-ten warp drive, the matter and anti-matter flow visible through the blue, tubular magnetic construction segments feeding into the central core assembly possessed a distinctively swirling motion instead of the steady and regular pulse on the previous drive.

"I don't mind what it looks like as long as it gives us enough power for our overhauled weapons and the new transphasic shields," said So'Dan Leva, the half-Romulan tactical officer who stood at the master control station that some engineers had nicknamed the pool table due to its vague resemblance to the popular gaming accessory. "If you ask me this is by far the most interesting update we've received."

"Agree to disagree," said Hopkins.

"I'm sure you'll see things my way if we should ever find ourselves surrounded by enemy ships and those impenetrable shields are the only things standing between us and certain destruction," Leva said.

"The transphasic shields do not, technically, provide impenetrable protection," said Xylion who was quite familiar with the design since *Eagle* had been used as a testbed for the technology during a mission into a nebula containing radiation that would have been deadly to the crew without it. "Its rapid frequency shift into alternate phase states has shown a nearly sixty percent increase in blocking beam and projectile impacts as long as the significant energy input requirements the emitters require can be met."

"And that's the crux of the matter," said Hopkins. "The new warp core gives us quite a bit of additional punch, but even that won't be enough to run those shields for much longer than a few hours. And forget about going to warp with those shields up. Not enough juice to go around for both."

Alendra nodded. "In my, admittedly limited experience, being able to warp out of a battle that is going the wrong way is a godsend. Seems like a tough compromise to me."

Lieutenant Marjorie Alendra was one of the most recent additions to *Eagle's* crew. The blue-skinned and bald-headed Bolian officer had come on board a few months earlier on Lieutenant Commander's Leva recommendation who had served with the woman briefly on the USS *Sacajawea*. He had been made her first officer in an assignment that had lasted mere days before the ship had been destroyed. According to Leva, Alendra had served on the other vessel in multiple roles at various times, including as a pilot, an engineer, a tactical officer, as well as at operations, and even as the executive officer, mostly due to the shortage of experienced officers during the war years. On *Eagle*, she had ostensibly become Leva's deputy tactical officer but her versatility had allowed her to pick up various tasks as required.

"Don't sell yourself short," Leva said. "You've seen plenty of combat during the war."

"Enough to last me a lifetime. I'd be happy not to get into another major battle for the rest of my career."

"I can't promise that," said the tactical officer. "What I can say is, regardless of how long the transphasic shields last under fire, even having just a few additional seconds during a heated battle can mean the difference between life and death."

Culsten nodded. "Agreed. A little bit of extra security doesn't hurt, especially since we're about to embark on a mission that will literally take us where no one has gone before." He quickly continued when he noticed Xylion raising his eyebrow. "Except maybe for automated probes and whatever indigenous people call it their home."

He offered a short nod at his accurate correction.

"But we'll be the first Starfleet ship crew to get to see the Seven Sisters with our own eyes. Now, I don't know about you guys, but that's what got me really excited," he said.

Xylion had always found it somewhat peculiar that Lif Culsten, as a Krellonian and non-Federation citizen, seemed to exhibit a surprising comfort and familiarity with human traditions and customs in favor of his own people's heritage, almost as if he had chosen to fully assimilate into a culture not his own. This was evidenced by his decision to refer to the star cluster they had set out to explore by its human nickname.

"I would be more excited about this if we didn't have to rely on untested technology to get there," said the chief engineer. "Whoever thought that using a warp sled to travel space was a good idea?"

"I think it only adds to the appeal," Culsten said.

To that Alendra shot him a puzzled glance. "I'm surprised to hear you say that. All the pilots I've ever known hated the idea of surrendering control of their vessel to anyone else, especially a machine."

"There is that," he said, nodding slowly. "But the idea of going faster than even Lou's new drive could possibly make us go? I don't know, it makes me feel giddy, I have to say. Come to think of it, maybe that's the way to break those speed records, huh?"

But Hopkins crossed her arms in front of her chest, not nearly as excited about the idea.

"As long as we get to be explorers again, I don't think it matters too much how we get there," said Deen. "It's what we are supposed to be doing. When was the last time we had a chance to live up to the Starfleet charter and discover actual new worlds?"

"Three years, ten months, and fourteen days," Xylion said.

"Way too long," said Culsten, nodding in agreement.

Alendra nodded as well. "For me, it's the first time, so I'm definitely excited."

"Let's focus on the task at hand first. Before we even get a chance to seek out new life and new civilizations, we will need to travel through occupied Cardassian space. And these days, that is some seriously dangerous territory," said Leva, who to no one's surprise, was keeping his mind on the tactical challenges of their upcoming mission. "Warp sled or not, we may easily find ourselves in a sticky situation before we even get to where we want to go. We'd be lucky if we'll be able to speed our way through that hot zone."

"No kidding," said Alendra. "We've already lost two ships, the *Phoenix* and the *Sojourner* earlier this year, not to mention Point-Station Epsilon and the destruction of the Klingon headquarters on Lakesh."

"But we'll be mostly traversing Romulan-occupied space," said Deen. "Isn't it much calmer on their side?"

"The only reason for that," said the Bolian, "is because they tend to squash any sign of trouble with the use of disproportional

force. And since violence only begets more of the same, I think it's only a matter of time before things will spiral out of control in their territory as well."

Leva didn't seem to like what he was hearing, or perhaps it was the tone of Alendra's voice. "There are Romulans who are trying to make the occupation work and are genuinely interested in helping the Cardassians rebuild. It's an unfair characterization to paint them all with the same brush."

"I suppose you have some special insight into that situation," she said, sounding, at least to Xylion's ears, surprisingly confrontational.

"Just because my mother is Romulan doesn't mean I have a greater insight into how that half of my people conduct themselves," he shot back.

She shook her head. "I meant to say that you have friends in the Romulan Guard."

Leva and Alendra stared at each other for a moment.

"One," he finally said.

Xylion believed that he was referring to a female officer he had met during his mission to Romulus during the war and with whom he had briefly reunited a few weeks ago while she had traveled to Earth as part of a diplomatic delegation. He couldn't be certain but it seemed as if this subject of conversation had suddenly introduced some tension between them.

"Right. Well, if you'll excuse me, I have a bridge shift starting soon," said Alendra and then promptly left engineering.

Xylion was fairly certain that her scheduled shift was not due to commence for another two hours and twelve minutes.

"I'll better get on my way as well," Leva said only moments after Alendra had departed so suddenly. He glanced at Hopkins before he went. "We'll schedule some simulations on how the transphasic shields will hold up with the new warp core before we reach Cardassian space."

"I will make sure to make time for those."

He nodded and left in Alendra's wake.

"Was it just me or did that feel somewhat awkward?" said Culsten once the doors to main engineering had closed shut again

behind the tactical officer. "If I didn't know any better, I would say something is going on between those two."

"Best not to pry," said Deen.

Hopkins nodded in agreement and went back to work on the master control station. "I suppose you have to appreciate that he still stands up for his people even considering he's not fully Romulan himself."

Xylion agreed with that sentiment, fully appreciating that So'Dan Leva had noticeably struggled with his identity and his split heritage ever since he had known the man. The fact that he was able to identify with his Romulan side was certainly a positive step in his opinion if for no other reason than to satisfy his scientific curiosity of exploring the shared commonalities between the Vulcan people and the Romulans who after all, at one point, had all been one people.

He was just about to continue assisting Hopkins, Deen, and Culsten on the work they still had to complete before *Eagle* could be safely coupled to the warp sled that was due to take them further than they had ever traveled before when he noticed that unbeknownst to Hopkins, Culsten was still considering the chief engineer with a skeptical expression decorating his face, apparently still considering her last words.

"Or maybe he has just taken a liking to his Romulan friend. Maybe this has nothing to do with him standing up for his people."

She looked up at him, surprised and clearly not having expected his retort.

Xylion, too, had to admit that he wasn't certain why Culsten had insisted on making that point.

"Maybe," she said carefully. "But then I would rather like to think better of him."

"Defending a people who have shown a systematic disregard for the good of their own populace does not make one a better person," he said, sounding uncharacteristically forceful considering the subject matter. Xylion had never known Culsten as a man of great convictions. That was not to say that he couldn't be serious if the occasion called for it. He had, in the past, shown more than once his ambitions to rise above his current station in Starfleet, but it was unusual to hear him take such a strong position on what appeared to be a social or even political issue.

“Maybe defending such an institution or government is wrong, but he’s right in saying that not all people who live in such a society are necessarily complicit in the actions of that government. There are good people in most bad societies actively trying to make a change,” said Hopkins, and surprisingly to Xylion, quickly matching Culsten’s sharp tone, implying that this wasn’t the first time they had engaged in this topic of conversation.

“Well, I don’t see him trying to make a change. I think he’s mostly just content to stay out of it altogether.”

“Does he, though?” she shot back. “A couple of years ago he went back to Romulus, the very heart of the Romulan Empire, to appeal directly to their senate to enter the Dominion War.”

“On Starfleet orders.”

“From what I heard it was mostly a suggestion. Besides, he’s clearly still engaging with his own people and showing an interest.”

Culsten dismissed this with a wave of his hand. “His interest seems to have very little to do with his desire to improve the conditions of his people in general.”

Deen jumped in before Hopkins had a chance to respond, perhaps sensing the impending circularity of the argument that was unfolding. “I am going to go on a limb here and assume that we’re not actually talking about Romulans anymore.”

Both Culsten and Hopkins threw her very similar blank looks that quickly turned into embarrassed expressions when they realized that they had allowed their argument to be voiced so openly.

“You know what?” Culsten said and very briefly glanced at Hopkins while doing so. “I still need to review the navigational data for our upcoming trip. I’m sure you can finish here without me,” he added and then left almost as quickly as Alendra and Leva had done before him.

“And the Captain is waiting for my progress report on the warp sled integration,” said Hopkins, picked up a padd and then headed for the exit as well, except she headed for the exact opposite direction Lif Culsten was taking.

Xylion looked at Deen at her side, the only member of the senior crew remaining with him in engineering. “I may be mistaken but it certainly appears that the tension level amongst the crew is

surprisingly high considering the recent shore leave and the nature of our upcoming assignment."

She considered him for a brief moment but then simply shrugged. "I hadn't noticed," she said and then went back to work.

As Deen was clearly not interested in discussing his observation on their colleagues any further, which in itself seemed somewhat out of character for her, he decided to join her since the unexpected reduction of their original team had now significantly increased their workload.

After all his years working alongside emotionally-inclined species, he had to admit that they still tended to perplex him on a fairly regular basis.

## 2

"I haven't seen a starship crew this excited over a mission since my first assignment out of the Academy. It's not just that we'll get a chance to finally truly explore new regions of the galaxy. I think it's also the fact that we're getting to do it now, after the Dominion War and the various crises that we've had to deal with before and after. There has been an increasing sense of resignation – and I don't mean just on this ship – that the purpose of Starfleet has become fighting wars and managing galactic emergencies. It has become so prevalent that some of the younger officers and recruits these days only know about Starfleet's mission of exploration through reading about it. But I'm convinced that for many of those people – and I count myself among those – when they first dreamt about joining Starfleet, they did so because they were enrapt by the stories of the great explorers of yesteryear and the chance to someday follow into their footsteps." Tazla Star nodded with a growing smile on her face while listening to her captain speak. "Some of my career choices may say otherwise, but I was one of those kids with stars in her eyes when I grew up. There was a time when I had wanted to be an explorer more than anything."

Michael Owens considered his red-haired first officer sitting opposite him at the desk of his ready room and had to admit that he didn't have an easy time imagining her having had the same dreams he'd had when he was a child. And perhaps this was because part of him still saw her as the woman she had been when she had first joined his crew two years earlier when all he had truly known about the former starship captain had been that she had shown poor judgment and acted rashly just months into her first command and as a result, people had lost their lives.

She had later admitted that she had spent a significant time of her career as a clandestine operative for a shady branch of Starfleet Intelligence, mostly beholden to one ruthless individual who had been chiefly responsible for her eventual downfall.

He had long since moved past his trust issues with Tazla Star who had repeatedly shown herself more than willing to not only start her career anew on *Eagle* but also put herself in harm's way to protect her new ship and crew. There was no denying that she had come a long way since that first day she had stepped into his office, and perhaps – Michael thought – it wasn't so hard after all to imagine that this version of Star had once shared much more in common with him than he would have ever thought possible.

The annunciator interrupted his brief reverie and he glanced towards the doors of his ready room. "Come in."

The doors parted with a hiss to allow Louise Hopkins to enter the room, bringing with her a padd. "Captain. Commander."

"Lieutenant," Star said. "How's that new power plant fitting in?"

The young engineer smirked. "Oh, she's fitting in quite nicely, Commander. I know the Mark-X wasn't designed for this class of ship but I won't stop until she feels like the most natural fit and purrs like a wildcat."

Michael nodded. "And you'll have the time to do just that. It'll take us a good three weeks to reach the Pleiades, even using this new warp sled we'll be using to get us there."

"That's why I'm here," she said and handed him the padd. "I've finished the work schedule to get the ship ready to connect to the sled. I'm still a little nervous about the idea of hooking all our systems up to another vessel and letting it take us into warp,

especially with the untested upgrades we've only just installed on *Eagle*."

"I've been assured that this warp sled is perfectly safe and fully compatible with all our systems," Michael said as he glanced over the padd.

"Yes," the engineer said, sounding cautious. "I have been told the same thing. But still, we'll be the first Starfleet ship to use this technology for an extended period of time. I guess I just don't like the idea of being the guinea pig for Starfleet R&D."

Star smirked. "Ah, Lieutenant, where's your sense of adventure? Starfleet was founded on the idea of testing new and experimental technologies. The first transporter, the warp-five engine, the duotronic computer system; it all had to start somewhere. Why not us for the next great thing? Imagine, they may mention your name in the history books among Cochrane, Erickson, and Daystrom."

But Michael could tell that Louise Hopkins wasn't the type to clamor for glory and fame. After all, differently from him and Star, she had clearly not signed up to Starfleet to become an explorer, generally preferring the more familiar surroundings of her engineering room instead.

"Don't get me wrong, I love the idea of new technologies. *Eagle* hasn't exactly been at the forefront of cutting-edge systems over the years. It's just with the new warp drive, the improved weapons systems, those transphasic shields, and now the warp sled, there are a lot of things that could go wrong and if they do, we might be a long way from a friendly port to get help."

"Sounds like a challenge to me," Michael said. "And if there is one thing I know you've never shied away from it's a challenge."

The little spark in her eyes revealed that she wasn't about to start now. "I guess that's true."

"That's what I thought," he said and handed the padd back to her. "How long to make the necessary modifications to prepare for the warp sled?"

"Oh, those are easy. Half a day or so. We should be all ready to go once we get to our rendezvous. I suggest we take our time once we get there though, I want to complete a few full level one system

diagnostic before I'm going to be totally comfortable to hand over our propulsion to another vessel."

"Sensible," said Star and exchanged a quick nod with the captain. "Make sure you work closely with Culsten on this," she added. "We'll still be responsible for navigation and I want to make sure he is as prepared as he can be piloting the sled."

Michael didn't miss the pained look that crossed her features when Star mentioned the Krellonian helmsman. "Uh, yes ... yes, of course. If you'll excuse me now. I better get started on the modifications."

Michael dismissed her with a nod and the engineer headed for the exit.

"Oh, Louise?" he said before she had reached the doors.

Hopkins turned around.

"I know you'll be busy over the next three weeks working on your new warp core, not to mention keeping an eye on that sled but I really hope you'll be able to join us for the ship's concert. The performers worked hard on their acts." Ordinarily, he wouldn't have felt it necessary to remind anyone about the upcoming concert but Hopkins tended to skip social gatherings whenever she could.

"I'll make sure to make time for it," she said and then quickly left.

Michael looked back at his first officer. "Is there something the matter between our pilot and engineer I'm not aware of?" he said. While the couple hadn't exactly advertised their relationship, it hadn't been a great secret either, especially since they had only recently spent nearly three weeks on shore leave together.

"I'm not entirely sure," she said. "But I think there may have been some tension between them ever since they came back from Krellon a few weeks ago."

There was a reason why he wasn't exactly fond of the idea of his officers engaging in intimate relationships with each other. And while Starfleet was infamous for its proclivity of having long and detailed regulations on most aspects of the service, and had quite a few guidelines regarding fraternization between officers and enlisted personnel, there were no rules against members of a starship crew, of any rank or position, to become romantically involved with each other.

And Michael could appreciate that it was unrealistic to expect people who served together on a relatively large starship that practically functioned like a small community, not to gravitate towards each other over time. He also understood that this could lead to serious challenges as well, such as when Gene Edison, his former first officer who had fallen in love with ship's security chief Nora Laas had been tragically killed in action while at her side. It had taken the usually steadfast Bajoran a long time to get over that terrible loss.

Star seemed to know what he was thinking. "I'll keep an eye on them," she said, and he nodded. "Now, about that concert," she added, clearly not wishing to stay on the subject, most likely since she possessed a more liberal view on inter-ship romances than he did. "I hear you've gotten a sneak peek at some of the acts already."

He smiled, remembering DeMara impressive rehearsal he had witnessed the previous day. No, it hadn't been Rossini, which he would have preferred, and the performance had felt a little bit too forced and risqué for his tastes, but there was no doubt it would be a hit with the crew once they got to see her and her troop singing and tap dancing all over the stage in a week's time. "Yes, I was lucky enough to get an early taste."

She offered him a beaming grin. "Rank hath its privileges."

"Indeed. And from what I've seen, they will quite literally bring the house down," he said.

*"Bridge to Captain."*

Michael glanced up on hearing Lieutenant Alendra's voice who was apparently the duty bridge officer at present. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

*"Sir, we've just picked up a ship on an intercept course. And they're in a real hurry to get to us."*

Michael and his first officer exchanged puzzled looks, neither of them expecting a rendezvous until they reached the Aldebaran system where *Eagle* was due to link up with the warp sled.

"We'll be right there, Owens out," he said and stood.

"Are we expecting guests?" Star asked as she followed him onto the bridge.

“Not to my knowledge,” he said just before he stepped through the parting doors and walked onto the bridge where Alendra had already gotten up from the command chair to make way for him.

“Sensors have just identified her as the *Alexander Hamilton*. And she’s doing warp nine point two,” she said.

Lieutenant Lance Stanmore turned around from the operations console he was currently manning. “According to her transponder signal, she’s carrying Admiral Throl’s flag.”

Michael nodded. Throl was his commanding officer but it was unusual for him to come out in person to speak to him. In fact, he could not remember the last time they had met under such circumstances. Whatever it was he wanted, it was very urgent, very important, or quite possibly both.

Alendra had moved to the tactical board on the horseshoe-shaped console behind and above the command area. “Sir, the admiral is requesting permission to beam onboard.”

“Helm, drop us out of warp and prepare for the rendezvous,” Michael said.

“Aye, sir,” responded Ensign Srena and after only a moment, the Andorian had cut the warp engines as evidenced by the settling starscape on the view screen. “We’ll be in transporter range in four minutes.”

Michael turned to look at Alendra first. “Lieutenant, advise the *Hamilton* that we’re ready to receive the admiral,” he said, and then to his first officer: “I guess we’re having a guest after all.”

She dipped her head slightly. “I shall welcome the admiral on board and show him directly to your ready room.”

\* \* \*

Just a few minutes later Tazla Star received Admiral Throl in the transporter room.

Tazla liked Throl.

The Denobulan flag officer, almost a full head shorter than she, didn’t carry with him the same kind of arrogance and standoffishness that was often commonplace amongst members of the Admiralty. It

was also refreshing not to be subject to the often unspoken but almost always judgmental looks she received from officers of his rank who were not willing to look beyond her blemished record that had ultimately led to her months-long stint at the Starfleet stockade.

Of course, she understood that suspicion was justified, after all, the decisions she had made in her past had led to preventable casualties, even if there had been mitigating circumstances, and had it not been for the Dominion War, she most likely would still be in that prison cell today.

Yet Throl seemed to be thinking none of those things as he bounded down the transporter platform, evidencing his great energy and defying his age, and then offered Star a typically wide Denobulan grin after she had formally given him permission to come onboard.

She escorted the admiral up to deck one while Throl made a few polite comments about the ship and her crew but refused to give away any indication as to the purpose of his visit.

"Michael, it is so good to see you again," said Throl once he had entered the ready room along with Tazla Star. He had quickly crossed the small office while Owens had left his chair and then vigorously shaken the captain's hand with both of his.

"Admiral, always a pleasure," Owens said, returning the friendly smile even if he was biologically incapable of mirroring the Denobulan's width. "Can I offer you something?"

"I know you are fond of tonic waters," the admiral said. "I'll try one, thank you."

Star beat Owens to the replicator and ordered three beverages before placing them on the captain's desk.

"I was just pointing out to Commander Star what a fine ship and crew you have here."

Throl may not have been the most typical Starfleet admiral she had encountered but making general platitudes seemed to be an inherent part of a flag officer's repertoire.

"Thank you, sir, we're all very proud of her," he said.

"I'm glad we finally got her in for that much-needed overhaul," the admiral continued as he took a sip from the tonic water but without settling down in the chair. "Uh, bitter. But not bad, not bad at all," he said, the unfamiliar beverage distracting him only

momentarily. "Starfleet has been very pleased with *Eagle's* performance and the new modifications will ensure that she remains one of the fleet's most reliable ships of the line."

Owens exchanged a quick look with her before he considered the admiral again. "That's good to hear and I have every confidence that she will."

"So do I, Michael," he said and took in the ready room. "I don't think I've been on *Eagle* since you first took her on her maiden voyage. I really don't get out enough." He stopped in front of the large canvas of the colorful painting of a green landscape surrounding a yellow country home that hung on the far wall. "That's quite something. Reminds me of an Edward Hopper."

Tazla threw Owens another look, this time surprised to find that Throl was apparently somewhat of an art aficionado, and judging by the captain's expression he was just as surprised.

Owens smirked as he joined him. "Nothing quite as fancy, I'm afraid. It's a watercolor painting of my family home on Earth. It was done a few decades ago by a close friend of my father's."

Tazla was out of her element, not being particularly familiar with art, all she could really tell from her rudimentary knowledge was that it had been painted in the style of realism and that she had always thought it odd that Owens had it in his office, since it had clearly once belonged to his father with whom he'd had a conflicted relationship while he had still been alive. Not to mention that as a self-proclaimed explorer, she would have expected him to decorate his office with something less homey.

The admiral turned away from the painting and to Owens. "I was very sorry to hear about your father's passing and that I was not able to attend the funeral. We lost a great man."

Owens nodded, acknowledging his sentiment but said nothing.

He hadn't opened up to her much about how he felt after his father had passed away just a few weeks ago and while they had still been on Earth. She had actually been right there with him, on shore leave on a boat off the Australian coast, when he had gotten the news. And it had been obvious that it had hit him hard. Much harder, she guessed, than he would have expected. Shore leave had naturally been canceled, at least for the captain and she had spent a bit of time speaking to him afterward, but very little of what he had talked

about had actually given her any insight into how he had felt about his father when he had been alive, or now, that he had passed.

"Admiral, I take it you didn't come all the way out here for a social visit. Not that we don't appreciate you joining us," Owens said and gestured at one of the two chairs facing his desk.

Throl nodded and took a seat, followed by Owens. Tazla took the remaining chair by the admiral's side. "Yes, of course. I'm sure you have been wondering about that and I won't keep you in suspense any longer. In fact, it is quite imperative that we discuss the matter I've come to see you without further delay."

"I assume your personal visit means that we are no longer heading for Messier 45," said Owens, doing a decent job of trying to mask his disappointment even if he wasn't entirely successful.

"Just to be clear, that mission is merely delayed. Not canceled," he said quickly. "Now that the war is over, Starfleet still has every intention to allocate some of our admittedly dwindled resources to the purposes of expanding our reach into previously uncharted regions of space."

Owens nodded. "That is good to hear. What is the nature of this delay, Admiral?"

"The Federation Council was contacted five days ago by representatives from the Krellon Star Alliance asking for urgent assistance with a medical emergency on one of their border colonies. An outbreak of a highly infectious viral disease of sorts has mystified their medical community and has spread across the entire planet in a matter of days."

"The Krellonians?" Owens said, clearly surprised. "I cannot recall a time they have ever sought out any kind of assistance from the Federation."

"They have several trade treaties with us," said Tazla who was in her element when it came to galactic politics thanks to her intelligence background. "It is a mostly one-sided arrangement in which we export quite a few resources to them for very little import in return and ostensibly to foster improved relationships with their highly xenophobic government. They've also imposed very strict guidelines on any trade or travel arrangements. Last I heard, Federation ships are not allowed to cross into Krellonian space and

any cargo is usually transferred onto their own freighters at the border."

Throl nodded, "That is exactly right, Commander," he said and looked back at the captain. "As you can imagine, the Federation Council believes that this latest development could be a possible step to improve and perhaps even normalize relationships between our people. Following the war, we are desperate for new allies and if there is even a small chance that this could lead to more than a costly trade agreement, the Council is willing to extend any help that has been requested."

"Not to mention trying to be a good neighbor," said Tazla.

Throl offered her grin. "And that, of course."

"What kind of help have they asked for exactly? What do we know about the medical situation on their world?" Owens asked.

"Very little, I'm afraid. They have not been willing to share any details about the nature of their medical crisis beyond what I've told you."

"Krellonian space is deep in the Beta Quadrant," said Tazla. "It would take us weeks to get there. There must be closer ships that could respond to this emergency, not to mention actual hospital ships that would be better suited for such a mission."

"All very true, Commander. However, *Eagle* has been requested specifically for this assignment."

This brought up both officers short. Alarm bells were already beginning to sound in her mind but Owens asked the question first. "Why us? If this is such a critical emergency and they're reaching out to us for the first time in what seems like forever, why would they request a very specific starship?"

"They haven't told us. Our best guess is that it might have something to do with your pilot."

"Lif?" she said.

He nodded. "There aren't many Krellonians in Starfleet. They can probably be counted on one hand. Lif Culsten I understand is fairly well connected within the Krellonian government even if I wouldn't be able to tell you exactly how due to the secrecy in which the Krellonians like to shroud themselves. As it turns out, Mister Culsten hasn't been exactly forthcoming with his family connections either, according to his file."

Owens uttered a sigh and tugged down on his uniform jacket which Tazla immediately interpreted as a sign of discomfort. She didn't blame him at all. "Admiral, I have to be honest, I don't like any of this."

"I didn't think you would, Michael."

"The last time we were asked to travel to a world to seek out a potential new ally, the mission turned into a disaster. And mostly because of how Starfleet had decided to handle that situation internally."

She was thankful that he had not looked her way when saying this, considering that she'd had something to do with the way things had turned out on the mission he was referring to.

Throl acknowledged this with a small nod. "I know what you're thinking. This will not be another Tiaita. Yes, Starfleet is desperate for allies but not nearly as much as it was during the darkest days of the war. We are not bending over backward to accommodate the Krellonians. Your mission is to go to their planet and assist them in a medical capacity in any way you can. If you are able to create some goodwill amongst their leadership in the process: Excellent. If it turns out you are not able to assist at all: Then so be it. Neither I nor the Federation Council expects you do to do anything beyond that."

Owens nodded slowly. "There is still the point of getting there."

"You'll continue to Aldebaran and link up with the warp sled as originally planned. But instead of heading toward Cardassian and Ullian space, you'll be heading for the Amargosa Diaspora. Krellon space lies just beyond. If the sled works out as advertised, the trip will take just a few days."

"Admiral, a question, if I may?" said Tazla.

"Of course."

"If this is merely a medical mission – putting aside for the moment that we were specifically requested – why did you come out here in person to tell us this? You could have briefed us about this mission just as well over subspace."

The admiral hesitated for a moment and the look on Owens' face made it clear that he had been wondering about the exact same

thing. "Commander, would you mind giving us the room for a moment?" Throl said.

She shot a brief look at the captain who gave her a nod. "Of course," she said, stood, and left the room.

\* \* \*

"I don't really appreciate keeping secrets from my first officer, Admiral," Michael said after the doors had closed behind Tazla Star.

"Nothing I'm about to tell you has to be kept from her, Michael. I just wanted to tell you first before you decide if you wish to share this information."

He leaned back in his chair slightly, bracing himself for whatever was coming next.

Throl took another sip from his beverage and allowed his gaze to briefly wander over to the large painting before he spoke. Then he looked back at the captain. "This mission is being handled through the Department of Special Affairs and Investigations."

That in itself was, of course, no great revelation or reason for concern since SAI often took an interest in missions that could have wider implications for Starfleet. But Michael understood why Throl had decided to tell him this in private. SAI had been headed by his late father and what Throl likely didn't know, was that Jonathan Owens had very surprisingly asked him – demanded really – that he leave *Eagle* and came to work for him just a day before he had died.

"There isn't much more I can tell you since SAI is almost as bad at sharing information as the Krellonian government seems to be. What I can tell you is that since your father's passing, the agency is being led by a man I think you know quite well."

"Jarik," Michael said, referring to his half-Vulcan former Academy roommate with whom he had reconnected while on Earth recently and after he had been startled to learn that he had been working for his father for years.

Throl nodded. "Yes. He has been named interim director and will assume operational command of this mission. He is awaiting you in the Arkaria system which is practically on your way to Krellon space and he will brief you in more detail once you get there."

"I'm confused," Michael said. "You mentioned that there were no more details to share. That the Krellonians had been very vague about their request." He continued before Throl had a chance to speak up again. "No, let me guess. There is more, it's just that you're not privy to that information. Something else is going on here. I mean why else would SAI be involved and presumably make you come to see me in person instead of using subspace."

The admiral nodded slowly. "I suspect as much, yes. But Michael, I am not negating my point from earlier. No matter what else Jarik and SAI are up to, your mission as far as Starfleet Command is concerned is clear. You are to assist the Krellonians with their medical emergency. You are not authorized for anything beyond that. This is not an intelligence op and you are not expected, or in fact cleared, to carry out any kind of clandestine mission against a foreign power."

"Right," he said, sounding unconvinced. "And if Jarik asks me to? You said it yourself, he has operational command and Arkaria is at the outer edges of Federation space. Command's influence out there is bound to be limited."

"Michael, I trust your judgment. You have navigated these kinds of waters before. And whatever decision you end up making, I will back you completely."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence."

Throl stood. "You've earned it," he said and shook his hand once Michael had stood also. "Watch your back out there and good luck."

Michael had called Star back into his office to escort the admiral to the transporter room but the nervous energy that Throl's visit had created didn't allow him to settle back down in his chair.

The expedition he and his crew had been looking forward to had been put on hold and instead, he had been tasked to cross half a quadrant to help out a people suffering from an unknown affliction. Had this been the end of the story, he would not have given the matter another thought, but as was so often the case, there was much more to this seemingly innocuous mission than met the eye, the involvement of his late father's agency the surest proof of this.

It also couldn't be a coincidence that Jon Owens had summoned him just a few weeks earlier to his secretive base hidden

beneath an old Russian mine to get him to drop everything that mattered in his life to join up with his cause, whatever that may have been.

He had said no at the time, even if after learning of his death due to a heart condition he had kept from him, he had wished that he had at least given it some further consideration or at least been less dismissive to his father's request.

But Jonathan Owens had never shied away from meddling in his Starfleet career, leading many to suspect – him included – that he had pulled the right strings at the right time to get him his own command. It had been a source of constant tension between the two men.

His father had spent most of his early childhood ignoring his existence but when he had managed to drive Matthew – his older brother – away from his family by his constant pressure to follow in his own footsteps and join Starfleet, that attention had suddenly shifted on him and Michael had eventually given in. That influence hadn't ended there and for the longest time, Michael had been unable to shake the feeling of his influential father controlling his life from the shadows.

His eyes found the painting of his childhood home that first and foremost reminded him of his better days when his mother had still been alive and before his brother had left it behind for good. Yes, it had been his father's but he had always drawn strength from it, perhaps despite its previous owner. It had served as a reminder of where he came from and perhaps what he was trying to leave behind.

### 3

"Now passing warp eight point five. Eight point seven. Eight point nine."

Michael listened closely as Lif Culsten read out their speed from his flight control station positioned at the front of the bridge and to his right, between the star-streaked view screen and the command area.

"Warp nine."

He felt the ship shudder slightly underneath him. After five years commanding *Eagle*, he had come to learn the meaning of every shake and tremble, liked to think that he could usually quite accurately predict his ship's status from the way the floor plating rumbled underneath his boots or from the manner in which his chair vibrated ever so slightly. However, this latest quiver was entirely new to him and it left him puzzled and unsure of what it meant. He didn't care for that feeling.

"That's the fastest we've been able to make her go," said Star sitting in her usual chair to his right, her eyes focused on the console to her side.

"Third time's the charm, is what they say," Michael said. The last two attempts of pushing the warp sled they had docked with back in the Aldebaran system had ended after the warp field destabilized once the vessel had pushed itself and *Eagle* embedded within just passed warp eight. Hopkins and her team of engineers had worked on fixing the issue all day and it seemed now, already late in what ordinarily would have been beta shift, that they apparently had found the solution.

"Warp field is stable," said Alendra who was standing at the aft engineering station and liaising directly with Hopkins and her team in the engine room. "Phase variance is in the green and well below the critical threshold."

"I'm having a good feeling about this," said Michael.

"You had a good feeling the last time," said Deen from her operations console to Culsten's left without lifting her own gaze from her board.

"I suppose your optimism is rubbing off on me."

Deen offered no retort, which Michael felt wasn't like her. Of course, she had been much moodier than usual lately, especially since learning that the changed mission to the Amargosa Diaspora and the delay to their expedition had also put a hold on the shipboard concert and its opening act for which she had practiced so hard.

"The ODN connection between *Eagle* and the sled are within standard parameters," said Xylion from the science station. "Data transfer rate remains stable."

Michael acknowledged the report with a quick bob of his head and then glanced at his first officer. "I say it's about time we get to see what this sled can do?"

She offered a grin in response. "Agreed," she said and regarded the helmsman. "Mister Culsten, if you please."

The Krellonian nodded eagerly. "Alright, everyone, hold on to your hats. Here we go," he said and dramatically entered the acceleration commands into his console. "Warp nine point one, point two, point three..."

"Field intensity remains stable," reported Alendra.

"Warp nine point four, point five."

Alendra turned from the engineering station. "I'm getting abnormal spikes in the sled's primary intermix chamber."

"It's happening again," growled So'Dan Leva quietly as he hovered over his tactical board.

But Michael was not willing to give up so quickly. "Can we compensate?"

"Attempting to switch to secondary intermix chamber now," said the Bolian.

But Xylion had more bad news. "ODN levels are indicating a possible overload in progress."

The captain turned to look at his first officer, a dark, almost annoyed frown having replaced his earlier good cheer.

Star nodded slowly, fully cognizant of what this meant. She sighed heavily. "Mister Culsten, shut it down."

\* \* \*

Nora Laas turned away from the viewport with an eye roll as she noticed the starfield that just moments ago had been streaking by the ship, having once more turned into the endless and star-dotted vista of outer space.

It was moments like these that she was thankful that she had decided to focus all her efforts on being a security officer, instead of pursuing the tactical track and spending the majority of her time on the bridge, staring at instruments and more than likely feeling the

frustration of having to witness the third shutdown of the warp sled's warp engine over the last ten hours.

At their current pace of trial and error, she figured that they would have been better off just ditching the sled altogether and head for the Amargosa Diaspora by using their supposedly much upgraded, native warp engine.

Those, however, were considerations better left to the captain and his bridge crew upstairs on deck one. She had her own issues to deal with as she turned back to look at the ten assembled men and women who had made themselves at home in one of *Eagle's* smaller crew mess halls.

She successfully managed to stifle a yawn. It was already fairly late and long after her normal duty shift had ended, but just like the bridge crew, she too was working long hours today, mostly because this had been the only time she had managed to get all the people who needed to be part of this meeting into a room together.

It was a wild bunch and one that at first glance looked nothing like a regular Starfleet crew. And of course, they weren't.

There was the tall, caramel-skinned, shorthaired, and muscular woman everyone apparently just called Diamond. Like with most of the people in this group, who seemed to prefer to go by nicknames, Nora had no idea why she was called this or what her real name was.

The short but stocky Tellarite went by Charm and it wasn't hard to guess that the moniker had been chosen sarcastically. It wasn't exactly a common theme for the rest of the group since the imposing Nausiccan was called Grunt, a name that seemed to accurately describe his preferred manner of communication. One-Shot was human and apparently unbeatable with a sniper rifle, or so she had been told. Violet had surprisingly luminous violet hair, not uncommon for Boslic women, and Boom, the Andorian was an explosives expert. The largest member of the team, a massive green-skinned Orion was usually referred to as Junior, Nora guessed because he was also the youngest member of the team. She could only guess how Ivory had gotten her name; the statuesque woman had skin as dark as the void of space and her calm and quiet manner seemed disturbing even for a Vulcan. The team of operatives was led by Chief Petty Officer Reynolds Sensabaugh who everyone simply referred to as Sensy. Perhaps more than the others, he could have

passed for a regular member of Starfleet, had it not been for his perfectly bald head and thick red beard that covered most of his lower face, a less regular sight amongst the usually more clean-shaven crew.

None of these people wore Starfleet uniforms and instead were dressed in a mixture of combat fatigues or slacks and simple vests and tunics. Violet, the Boslic woman wore a particularly revealing and low-cut top that highlighted her well-endowed chest while Ivory wore the most conservative outfit which at least had some resemblance to a uniform even if it seemed a tighter fit and darker in color than the current service dress.

To Laas, the Niners, as they called themselves, or, more officially, Starfleet Special Missions Team Nineteen, looked more like a group of randomly assembled mercenaries one would expect to find on a pirate vessel rather than special operations operatives assigned to a ship of the line.

However, in this meeting, it was she and her deputy, José Carlos, who were the odd ones out in their perfectly pressed uniforms and regulation haircuts.

The Niners had only recently joined *Eagle's* crew. Having come aboard on her recommendation to supplement the security team and attempt to fill the void left behind by the marines detachment that had left the ship after two years of exemplary service and sacrifice and who had been deemed no longer a necessity since the Federation was now officially in a state of peace.

The Niners' overall appearance and several other issues were at the center of the meeting's agenda.

"I don't understand the issue," said a flustered Carlos who was sitting at one of the tables with a padd in front of him. "You're all members of Starfleet. Members of Starfleet are expected to wear a Starfleet uniform. It comes with the job."

"Not with ours, it doesn't," quibbled Violet who was leaning back in a chair casually with her boots up on a table, paying the security officer very little attention otherwise.

"It's not really a choice," said Carlos.

"Listen, we've never worn regular uniforms," said One-Shot while he was playing with a particularly large combat knife. "I don't

see why we have to start wearing one all of a sudden just because you wanted us to come here to help you. Just don't add up to me."

"That's right," said Junior, the massive Orion. "Besides they don't make those clown outfits in my size."

That caused a round of laughter from his fellow team members. Ivory and Sensabaugh the only ones abstaining.

"I'm fairly certain we could replicate something that would fit you," said Carlos but was mostly drowned out by the amusement that had gripped most of the operatives.

"Alright, guys, let's all shut up for a minute," Sensabaugh barked loudly enough to cause his team to settle down. Not immediately but his words had an undeniable effect. "We all knew this wasn't going to be an easy transition for either us or the Fleeters," he said and then focused on the Hispanic security officer. "But they have a point, Lieutenant. SMTs don't usually serve on Starfleet ships, it's not really what we do. You call us in when everything else has failed and you need a quick, surgically precise resolution to a tactical problem. We're not rank and file."

"Exactly," said Diamond, the tall woman who acted as Sensabaugh's second in command. "So you can't treat us as such."

The team leader held up his hand. "No. But perhaps there are some compromises we can make. This is a new role for all of us but the last thing I want to hear is that Niners are not flexible," he said and regarded his people who were spread out all over the mess hall. "Least we forget that being adaptable is one of our key strengths."

"Does this mean we have to play dress-up and wear colorful uniforms?" Charm the Tellarite growled. "I look terrible in gold."

"You look terrible in anything," Violet said with a wide grin.

Laas felt it was time to interject. After all, she had a significant stake in making this arrangement work since it had been her brainchild to bring the special operators onboard when the captain had mulled over the decision of either keeping a full company of combat-trained marines on board or rather allowing civilians to return to *Eagle* after the two-year moratorium during the war.

The much smaller SMT team had seemed like a perfect compromise since they took up only a fraction of the space of a one hundred and fifty men strong contingent thereby making enough room for civilians and still maintaining a highly-specialized combat

unit on board. "Compromise is a two-way street, I've been told. I think I can sell the captain and first officer on the idea that a small group of people under their command do not wear uniforms."

This went over well with the operatives. Carlos shot her a surprised look, however.

"But you will need to wear combadges while on duty. And they must be visible at all times, preferably affixed to your left chest." She glanced over at Violet and the plunging neckline of her vest. "And you will have to maintain a certain dress standard in line with regulations."

The Boslic's grin widened. "There is an old saying I like to go by you've probably never heard of before. If you've got it—"

"It's that or standard uniforms," Laas said, cutting her off. "Your choice."

"Does Starfleet still have those cute little skants?" said One-Shot, shooting Violet a wide grin. "I think you'd look mighty fine in one of those, showing off those nice long gams of yours."

"Dream on, buddy."

"You know me too well."

"I think we can all agree to combadges and sensible clothing on duty," said Sensabaugh sharply.

"What's sensible, Sensy?" asked Junior. "I mean, do I have to wear a shirt all the time?"

The team leader rolled his eyes. "You're all grown men and women and this isn't a schoolyard. I trust you all to figure this out, including you Junior."

"Yes, boss."

"If in doubt," said Diamond. "Consult with Ivory, she's sensible enough to know what proper attire looks like."

The dark-skinned Vulcan woman offered the barest nod but said nothing at all.

Carlos glanced back at the security chief, looking slightly exasperated by this conversation but Laas simply nodded, letting him know that this was good enough of a compromise in her book. He turned back to the operators. "My next point is joint training and exercise routines. Some of my people have been complaining that you've been rather ... well, standoffish when it comes to that. Your team acts as an extension of the security department on this ship. We

are expected to work together, so it only makes sense that we train together as well."

Diamond looked at her boss, shaking her head. "That's not going to work, Sensy. We're not going to mollycoddle the locals so that they can feel like we're all together in this."

"Now wait a minute," Carlos said sharply, clearly offended by the implications. "We might not be special forces here but we are led by one of the toughest people I've ever known and I'd like to think that it shows in our training."

"You keep thinking that," said Charm who clearly didn't have the word diplomacy in his vocabulary. "I don't care if your chief is the second coming of Kahless the Unforgettable and Attila the Hun all rolled up into one, whatever little games you and your people play on the holodeck is nothing compared to what we train for pretty much every waking hour of the day. You wouldn't last ten minutes going through what we do."

One-Shot winced slightly at Charm's gruff tone and aimed Nora Laas a slightly contrite look. "You know, no offense."

"None taken," she said quickly. "It's been a long time since I've felt insulted by the words of a Tellarite."

Violet guffawed at that. "Hear that, Charm? Sounds like you really need to up your game here."

"The point we're trying to make," said Diamond, "is that we don't play well with others. We're not like the marines. We're an extremely fine-tuned machine, each one of us performing a vital role. When we say we train and work as a unit, we really mean it. And it's a formula that just doesn't work if you add a whole bunch of other elements to the mix."

"I have to agree with her, Lieutenant," said Sensabaugh. "I still think that having us here on *Eagle* could work for the both of us. If you insist on trying to integrate my team into your security department, I won't stop you, but I will guarantee that you will not get the efficiency and effectiveness you were hoping for when you got us to sign-up for this gig."

Nora nodded slowly. "Very well, we'll do it your way. As long as I can rely on you and your people to follow my orders and do what needs to be done when you are called upon."

*"Facta non verba."*

Nora aimed the Vulcan a surprised look. It had been the first time she had heard the other woman speak.

“That’s the creed,” said Diamond, and all her fellow operatives nodded along silently to underscore the motto which they lived by. Deeds. Not Words.

## 4

The speaking hall was packed to the seams with rapt listeners who had traveled long and far to hear this speech and even he could not deny a certain amount of excitement about hearing what he had to say. Very few people commanded quite the same amount of respect, not politicians, scientists, or entertainers and yet the speaker was a bit of all three. He had been greeted as he stepped onto the stage with thunderous applause.

“We have entered into our greatest age.” His opening words had the audience spellbound. It was perhaps the folly of men to believe that their generation was superior to all that had come before; that they were wiser and knew better than anyone who had preceded them. That it was their destiny to surpass all previous generations.

“We have entered this marvelous age because, after thousands of cycles of intelligent life on this planet, we have finally understood the true purpose of our collective existence. We have glimpsed the future of our kind and we are willing and able to grasp it and become that which we were always meant to be.”

The speaker walked across the stage, seemingly looking at each and everyone in attendance and feeding off their enthusiasm.

“We now know that what has held us back all this time has been the physical limitations of our forefathers who were enslaved to the feeble limits of the rotting shells they inhabited. Their lives were intrinsically linked to bodies that would fail them just when their minds were ready to fully comprehend what it meant to be alive.

But we have now at last conquered this deficiency by developing shells that give us abilities we never even dreamed of before and for the first time allowing us to truly evolve as a people by

letting our minds develop over centuries instead of over just a few cycles.”

It was no longer possible to deny that the temperatures that had been climbing steadily over the last fifty cycles were now beginning to show their toll on the general populace. It had become much more fashionable for those who could afford it to relocate away from the regions close to the equator, which for centuries had contained the most popular cities thanks to plenty of sunshine and the comfortably warm climate during all seasons.

The official statements from government scientists proclaimed that the sun was undergoing a period of increased solar flare activity that was likely going to last a few decades while the system’s lone star underwent a period of rapid expansion. Scientists claimed that this was no significant concern and merely a natural occurrence of the stellar transformation due to its age.

Once the star had fully completed this transformation, so the scientists said, solar flare activity would once again drop significantly and temperatures would once more return to the usual levels.

“The progress we have made to shell technology has been indisputable,” the speaker had said. “Only a few hundred cycles ago, the temporarily increased temperatures we are currently experiencing would have led to widespread medical conditions but thanks to having evolved beyond our need for purely biological bodies, the new environment we now find ourselves in hasn't been much more than a minor inconvenience.

We have eliminated the majority of all ailments our forebears would have had to endure because of the eventual breakdown of their biological processes. We can perform physical tasks without having to worry about the limitations of our bodies and as a result, have been able to undertake projects that have reshaped our entire world and advanced our civilization.

For a great many of us, we have been able to ensure that our shells match precisely the way we see ourselves and have been granted the unrestricted freedom to express ourselves in whatever

form we wish and continue to do so whenever we replace our outer forms and thereby increase our longevity and our capacity for expanding our minds further than anyone has ever considered possible.”

The promised halt to the rising temperatures never came. Instead, they continued unabated with each new cycle until the government had little choice but to focus the energy of almost the entire available workforce to undertake the most ambitious civil works project in the history of their people by constructing elaborate underground cities, some of which rivaled those found above the surface that were now being deserted by its inhabitants.

Soon it was no longer feasible to leave one’s home during daytime hours due to the relentless heat and depending on the season, people migrated to cooler parts of the planet until almost the entire population spent the majority of its time below the surface.

“Some have argued that we should have focused our great energies on developing other technologies instead of perfecting the synthetic shell. Some voices have tried to get us to abandon our greatest enterprise to instead divert our energies to some far-fetched notions such as cloning or space travel. But instead of exploring the stars, we as a people have chosen to answer a much greater calling. We have chosen to explore our own minds and souls in order to fulfill our truest potential.

Instead of looking beyond our world for answers, we are looking within ourselves to explore the true limitations of what it means to be a sentient being. And once we have unlocked this promise, we will find that there will no longer be any barriers to stand in the way of what we can accomplish as a people.

Our future will be filled with unlimited possibilities as we will be able to achieve whatever we will set our minds to.”

For all the obvious signs that had existed for many cycles, the day the world ended still came upon them all as a surprise. The government

had refused to acknowledge the true scope of the crisis until the bitter end. With no viable alternatives to escape the death of their planet, the decision was made to let the populace die in ignorance, instead of allowing them a chance to prepare for the end.

He had been one of the very few privileged persons who had known what was coming and as such had enjoyed the dubious honor of having a front-row seat to the apocalypse.

The unbearable heat, the sky turning into colors entirely unnatural and never once seen before, the sudden demise and then death of flora and fauna, the breakdown of communications as the satellites in orbit stopped working and then burned up in the sky, the failure and breakdown of technology and finally the mass extinction of an entire people, all this within mere hours.

The world had ended.

He survived.

Bensu awoke with a start.

He required a few moments to remember that he was exactly where he was supposed to be, in his quarters on the starship *Eagle*.

Looking out of the viewport beside his bed he could see that the ship was currently traveling at high warp, most likely thanks to the warp sled they were docked with but which he could not see from his window.

Looking at the star field deceptively streaking past the ship made him feel even queasier than he already did. Covered in sweat, he climbed out of his bed and walked over to the refresher to splash some cool water on his face.

The tired-looking visage that glanced back at him through the mirror, the roundish face, the dark green, almond-shaped eyes, the dark skin, and his hairless head with its multiple white bony ridges that ran from his forehead all the way to his neck, it was the exact same face he had seen in his dreams. It was the same face, the same body, of the man who had survived the end of his world.

Except, of course, it wasn't.

That body had died with the rest of Celerias a very long time ago.

This body was much newer but modeled almost precisely after the one he had once occupied.

How or why he had survived the destruction of his world, he didn't know. In fact, he had only very recently learned about that previous existence at all, thanks to an excursion to the Vulcan's Forge with his long-time friend Xylion. The same man who had come across his katra as a child some seventy years earlier and with whom he had shared a mind for over half a century.

Xylion had hoped that retracing their steps that had led to this very unusual bond between them so long ago would provide answers to their many questions. As it turned out the answers had only raised more questions.

And dreams.

Ever since he had managed to unlock some of the memories of his former life, he'd had the same dreams, or rather nightmares, of Celerias' elites espousing the many great virtues of the synthetic bodies that had become such an important part of the people's lives during the waning years of their world.

A glance at the chronometer brought him out of his sad reflections, realizing that he was going to be late for his shift behind the bar in the Nest, the ship's main crew lounge if he delayed much further.

Like he had done on so many other occasions lately, he decided to leave the past where it belonged and instead prepared himself for the day ahead and made sure that he put on the face that people on *Eagle* had come to expect from him. One that was always willing to listen and never seemed to show the slightest hint of his own, and as of late, increasing tribulations.

## 5

While his two lunch companions hadn't noticed, it had not escaped his meticulous attention to detail that Bensu had not been behind the bar as was usually the case at this time of the day when he had entered the Nest along with Tazla Star and DeMara Deen.

As they often did, Xylion and his companions had chosen a table on the upper level of the Nest and near the sloped and forward-facing windows that usually allowed for a great view of outer space

but that were currently obstructed by the warp sled *Eagle* was tethered to. After a few, frustrating attempts, the sled had finally allowed the ship to travel far faster than it would have been under its own power.

“Not much of a view today. Or for the next few days for that matter,” said DeMara Deen as she picked a chair, selecting the one that faced away from the windows and instead gave her a direct line of sight of Goldie, the man-high, golden statue of the Terran eagle captured with its wings fully unfurled.

“Just until we reach Arkaria,” said Star. “If we had continued for Messier-45 we would’ve had to put up with this view for at least three weeks.

“Not sure if that makes up for it. I wouldn’t have minded sacrificing the view in exchange for a real exploratory mission,” said Deen.

The first officer nodded in agreement. “Hopefully we’ll still get the chance once this current mission is resolved. Besides, I can’t wait for that concert. I’ve heard great things.”

“Not from Michael, I’m sure. He’s still fuming over the fact that I decided against opera.”

Xylion could see that Star seemed slightly confused by that response and he wondered if DeMara Deen had exaggerated the captain's feelings over her choice of performance act. The young Tenarian wasn't prone to embellishments as many other more emotional people he had met over the years. She was, however, one of the most emotional and therefore often difficult to predict.

Since Deen clearly did not seem willing to elaborate on her statement, he decided to take the conversation in a different direction. “Has the captain made a decision on briefing the crew? As of yet, we have not been given any indication of the nature of this new assignment that has preempted a carefully planned expedition.”

Star shook her head. “Not yet. But he will soon. Probably once we get to Arkaria. The captain doesn’t like keeping secrets from the crew. And trust me, he was just as excited about the Pleiades as you were,” she said with a little grin. “He’ll do whatever he can to make sure we get this latest mission resolved as soon as possible and get us back to doing what we were meant to do.”

“Excited is not the term I would have used,” he said.  
“However, a significant amount of planning has been invested to ensure the success of our exploratory assignment.”

“Of course,” she said, still grinning. “And I’m sure you’re simply expressing the missed opportunity to satisfy your scientific curiosity.”

“Not just mine, Commander. Any exploratory mission has the potential to further the scientific knowledge of the entire Federation.”

“Naturally.”

“Anyone seen Bensu?” said Deen, looking around. “Isn’t he usually already serving us by the time we sit down?”

Star offered the younger woman a frown. “The replicators are just over there if you can’t wait. It’s not part of his job to serve us.”

But before Deen could offer a retort, the resident bartender did appear, climbing up the spiral staircase while skillfully balancing a full tray. “Apologies for the delay, folks.”

“None are required,” Star said and shot Deen a quick look. “We are perfectly happy to serve ourselves.”

“Nonsense,” Bensu said. “The hardest working officers on this ship deserve a little bit of pampering now and then,” he said and began to distribute the food and drinks he had brought. “Plain boring *Plomeek* soup and a Vulcan mocha for you, Xylion,” he said and placed a bowl and cup in front of him. “A chicken club sandwich and *raktajino* for the commander and a baba ghanoush with a Tamarin frost for the lieutenant.”

Deen looked at her beverage for a moment.

Bensu noticed. “Something the matter with your usual choice?”

She bit her lower lip. “Actually, I feel like something a little different today if you don’t mind?”

Star appeared mildly annoyed by Deen’s insistence on making things more difficult but Bensu seemed more than happy to accommodate her. “Of course. What can I get you instead?”

“How about a Supernova?”

Bensu visibly froze and simply stared back at the Tenarian as if she had just grown a second head.

Deen briefly glanced at Star, uncertain why her request had prompted this response. “Is there ... something wrong with that?”

When the bartender remained unresponsive, the Trill first officer gently touched his shoulder. "Bensu, are you alright?"

He turned to look at Star. "Huh?"

"Is something the matter? You seem out of sorts."

Bensu quickly shook his head, offering her and Deen a beaming smile again. "No, no of course not. I'll get you that drink now."

But Star was not willing to let the matter go quite so quickly. "Are you sure? You zoned out there for a moment."

Bensu kept his confident smile. "It's nothing to worry about. To tell you the truth, I get a little dizzy when traveling at very high warp speeds. It usually goes away after a while," he said, picked up the unwanted Tamarin frost, placed it back on his tray, and then quickly departed to fetch the replacement.

"Do you think he's alright?" Deen whispered to the others.

"Perhaps next time, just get your own drink," Star said.

"Sensations of disorientation are not uncommon in many humanoid races when exposed to excessive warp velocities. Considering that *Eagle* has never traveled at this speed for extended periods, it is not entirely unexpected that some crewmembers may experience discomfort."

"It would help if we knew what race Bensu belongs to," said Deen.

"If he doesn't know —"

Star didn't get to finish her sentence and she stopped herself suddenly when she spotted Xylion jump onto his feet.

He had watched Bensu carefully after he had left the table, possessing a great amount of certainty as to what had prompted his odd reaction to Deen's drink choice. After all, he had shared the memories Bensu had only recently unlocked via a mind meld he had facilitated.

Even while Xylion had spoken, he had observed Bensu sway slightly in his walk and when it had become clear that he was about to collapse, he had quickly stood up to get to him before he could reach the staircase.

He was not quite fast enough to keep Bensu from losing his grip on the tray he was carrying that, along with the beverage it still carried, crashed loudly onto the deck, followed a moment later by Bensu himself.

Star and Deen jumped up from their seats as well.

Thanks to the head start, Xylion was by Bensus's side first and already tried to help him back up and onto a nearby empty chair when the other two joined him.

"Bensus, are you alright? What happened?" Deen asked with obvious concern.

"I don't know, I just got really dizzy for a moment and next thing I know, I'm on the floor."

Star was already looking him over for injuries. "Are you hurt?"

He shook his head once he was in the chair. "Nothing but my pride, Commander. Pretty darn clumsy of me."

"Maybe we should take you to sickbay," said Deen.

Bensus quickly shook his head. "I'll be alright. As I said I just get a little dizzy at high warp. I probably just need to catch my breath and then I should be perfectly fine again," he said and tried to stand up but Star had put a firm hand on his shoulder, keeping him from leaving the chair.

"I'd be much more comfortable if Eli gets to look you over first."

Xylion knew that she was referring to Elijah Katanga, *Eagle's* veteran chief physician whom Tazla Star's previous host had been a close friend to. He also understood precisely why Bensus didn't like the idea of being examined by a doctor.

"We seem to understand what has brought on his loss of balance. It is doubtful that Doctor Katanga would be able to significantly add to this diagnosis."

Star aimed him an almost puzzled look that quickly morphed into a more determined expression. "Regardless, I want him checked over. He may have been injured without knowing it. Or there might be a remedy for his condition."

Bensus glanced up at the Trill with an almost pleading expression on his face. "Commander, that's really not necessary. I'll just go get some rest and take it easy until I've fully acclimated to racing across the stars."

Xylion could tell from the look in Star's eyes that she had made her decision and was not going to be swayed. "You're going to sickbay, Mister. And just to make sure you get there, I'll take you myself."

Bensu uttered a resigned sigh. "Very well, Commander."

"I shall accompany you as well," Xylion said, and shortly after all three of them set out to take Bensu to the medical bay.

As it turned out, Xylion's prediction as to the level of assistance Doctor Katanga could provide Bensu had been fairly accurate. With his patient sitting somewhat restlessly on the biobed with both Xylion and Star nearby, the octogenarian physician ran several tests on Bensu seemingly without much success.

"Anything you can do?" Star said with her arms crossed in front of her as she watched as the doctor had just completed a third scan.

Katanga didn't respond to the question as if he had not heard her speak at all. Xylion observed a noticeable frown growing on the Trill's face, clearly not appreciating the way she had been rebuffed.

Not for the first time, Xylion took note that several crewmembers who he understood to be on friendly terms with each other were acting in rather unexpected ways as of late. And also not for the first time, he realized how much simpler and less confusing interactions between Vulcans were compared to those of races who insisted on displaying their emotions so openly.

"I'm fine," said Bensu and looked over his shoulder at Star. "It's just as I told you earlier. A bit of space sickness and nothing a good night's rest cannot fix."

"I would thank you to leave the diagnosis to the professionals," said Katanga sharply.

"Which is?" said Star.

Katanga looked up to at least acknowledge her presence this time but said nothing and returned to consider the readouts of his tricorder instead and murmuring quietly to himself.

Bensu continued when the doctor did not offer an answer. "I just really hate making a fuss over this and wasting everyone's time."

"The wellbeing of every member of this crew, Starfleet and civilian alike, is never a waste of time," Star said, sounding just as crisp as the doctor had.

Katanga nodded. "Quite so," he said without affording the Trill a look. "You are a most interesting individual, Mister Bensu."

"Just Bensu will do, Doctor."

"Right. What race of people did you say you belonged to?"

Bensu glanced at Xylion before answering. "Well, there is no easy answer to that question, I'm afraid."

Katanga looked at his patient before following his glance toward the Vulcan.

Xylion squared his shoulders and clasped his hands behind his back. "Bensu's exact origins have not been determined. It is a matter we have both explored in some detail and continue to do so."

"Interesting," said Katanga, more to himself than to anyone else in sickbay.

"But not entirely uncommon," said Star. "I appreciate it is not the same circumstance but my own parentage is somewhat of a mystery."

Xylion recalled that according to Tazla Star's personnel file, she, or rather the host that had later merged with the Star symbiont had been either orphaned or possibly abandoned while she had been an infant.

"Perhaps. But in your case, there has never a doubt that you are a Trill," said Katanga. "Whereas what we have with you, Bensu is a complete mystery as to your origins. And what I can tell from my surface readings, you possess a very remarkable anatomy that I would be quite interested in studying further."

Bensu stood. "If it is all the same to you, Doctor, I would rather return to my quarters and rest. Unless, of course, there is something specific you think you can do for me. Without any further examinations, that is."

"To be honest, with that unique anatomy of yours I wouldn't even know where to begin and it would be quite reckless to simply prescribe you something without having a closer look at what makes your body tick. But I believe we absolutely should schedule some time to have a closer look at you. Not just to satisfy my own medical curiosity, but we might find further clues to your own origins as well as be better prepared for any medical emergencies you may suffer in the future."

Bensu offered Katanga a wide grin. "I promise I will consider that kind offer, Doctor."

"You know, I could make that an order. As the chief medical officer of this ship, I do have that authority."

Xylion considered Katanga very carefully. "I believe, Doctor, that since Bensu is a civilian, you will find that there are certain limitations to your authority concerning any non-essential medical procedures."

"Of course, I forgot that you swallowed the Starfleet rulebook when you were a child," Katanga said with a good-natured smile to which Xylion merely raised an eyebrow. The doctor turned back to Bensu who was clearly ready to leave sickbay. "I apologize, I didn't mean for that to sound like a threat, nor would I ever suggest misusing my authority in such a manner. I merely want to make sure that we'll be able to treat you properly should the occasion arise."

Bensu was clearly not offended. "Thank you, Doctor, I do appreciate your concern. And as I said, I will consider what you have said. Now if you will all excuse me, I think I've already taken up more than enough of your time today."

"You'll be heading straight back to your quarters to rest for the remainder of the day, won't you?" said Star, and the tone in her voice made it quite obvious it had not been meant as a suggestion.

He gave her a firm nod. "You have my word, Commander."

"I will ensure you reach your quarters without further incident," said Xylion.

"And Bensu, if you experience any other —"

"Rest assured you would be the first person I call, Doctor. Thank you again. All of you," he said and then headed for the exit with Xylion following closely behind.

\* \* \*

Tazla Star remained behind after Xylion and Bensu had left, and for a moment simply watched on as Katanga began clearing up the instruments he had used to unsuccessfully attempt to diagnose his patient. "What are your thoughts on Bensu?" she asked after a moment of awkward silence had passed.

He finished putting away the instruments and shrugged. "He doesn't like doctors. Certainly wouldn't be the first iatrophobic

person I've come across in my career," he said and then headed for his office.

"Eli?"

When he refused to stop, Tazla followed him. "Alright, mind telling me when all this is going to stop?"

He took his seat behind his desk and picked up a padd without gracing her with another look. "When is what going to stop?"

She uttered a heavy sigh at his insistence on sticking with these immature antics, particularly considering that he had celebrated his eighty-eighth birthday not too long ago. "Aren't you getting a little too old for these childish games and holding on to grudges?"

At that, he did look her in the eye. "I don't know, Taz, shouldn't you know better, with those many lifetimes of experiences inside that slug of yours, than to betray your closest friends."

"That's a bit melodramatic."

"I don't think so. You acted against my implicit wishes by issuing an apology in my name regarding a decision we made over sixty years ago and that I still fully stand by to this day. I would call that a betrayal."

"Fine," she said and took a few steps closer. "And I apologized for doing it. How much longer are you planning to punish me for it?"

He uttered a little humorless laugh. "You apologize for a mistake or maybe an error of judgment. You knew exactly what you were doing and you were fully aware that I didn't wish you to do it."

She nodded. "I made a command decision. And in the process ensured the Federation maintained a vital trade ally."

"Exactly," he said. "You aren't sorry at all. You did what you needed to do and clearly would do it all over again in the same situation. That's not regret. You are looking for forgiveness."

"I am sorry that you're so upset over this," she said, trying to offer an olive branch.

"Well, you should have considered that before you chose to take that particular path. As you've said, you've made a command decision. Now you will need to live with the consequences."

Star realized that there was no winning her argument. "You've always been the most stubborn man I've known," she said and headed for the doors. She turned back to look at him before she left. "Just you make sure this will not become one of those things you've

end up regretting. We've been friends too long to let something like this come between us." She held out a tiny bit of hope that she'd be able to get through to him but when he refused to look back up from his padd, she uttered another sigh and left Katanga to steam on his own.

\* \* \*

Xylion and Bensu hadn't spoken after leaving sickbay and until they had reached the turbolift and even then Bensu didn't talk until the young enlisted man with whom they were sharing the car had stepped out after arriving at his destination.

"Thank you for your support in sickbay," Bensu said without even looking at his friend.

"I am not entirely comfortable with obfuscating my knowledge of what we have learned regarding your origins."

He turned to look at the Vulcan. "You said it yourself, I'm not in Starfleet. It is my choice if I wish to share this knowledge with other people. I am not subject to the same regulations as a member of Starfleet."

"Perhaps not. However, you are a member of this crew and this community. Therefore, you have certain obligations to ensure the safety and wellbeing of this crew and not to compromise either."

"Xylion, the moment I believe that I might be putting anyone on this ship at risk I'd be more than willing to be forthcoming about anything I know. Or perhaps even leave *Eagle* if I must. But while that is not the case, I'd rather not advertise that I come from a race of extinct beings who transplanted their minds into cybernetic bodies or that I somehow managed to survive the destruction of an entire planet only to end up being a passenger inside your head. I'm also not so sure how people would react to us building this synthetic body in secret and transferring my consciousness into it."

"It would not be a simple explanation," Xylion acknowledged.

"No, it certainly wouldn't. Nor am I interested in becoming a science project to be studied and dissected."

"Federation law protects all sentient beings. It is unlikely you would be subjected to any treatment against your will."

The turbolift arrived on the deck Bensu's quarters were located on and the doors opened. "Let's just say I don't want to put those laws to the test," he said and left the lift with Xylion following closely.

"I take it you have continued to experience dreams of your former existence."

He nodded. "Far too regularly than I care for. And I wasn't lying about the dizziness at high warp. I've always had that."

"That might be related to your physiology."

"I am thinking the same thing. After all, my people never really experienced space travel thanks to their enormously foolish shortsightedness."

"And yet their accomplishments in creating cybernetic bodies cannot be disregarded."

They both stopped outside the doors leading into Bensu's quarters. "Really? Tell me, how many other Celerians have you met?"

"I understand that to be a rhetorical query since the answer to your question is obvious and meant to imply that none other have survived the destruction of their homeworld."

Bensu offered him a large smirk. "Looks like sharing a mind with you for all those years has really rubbed off on you."

Xylion raised an eyebrow. "I suggest we engage in mediation techniques to try and address your ailment and your recurring nightmares. We might be able to uncover more about your origins in doing so."

But Bensu quickly shook his head. "To be honest, I'd rather not. I've had enough meditation to last me a lifetime when we shared a mind. Besides, what else is there to learn? These people focused all their attention on building shiny, new bodies to live longer, to be smarter, and to be stronger. And then, when their planet suddenly died, they all died along with it. End of story."

"Evidently not. You remain."

"Yes, lucky me," he said and yawned. "I have to be honest, all this excitement has tired me out. Besides, I've promised the good doctor and Commander Star that I'd be resting for what's left of the day. I think I'll do just that. Let's leave the past where it belongs, burned up and annihilated a very long time ago and very far away from here." With that, he turned and disappeared into his quarters.

## 6

After a few initial teething troubles with the experimental warp sled, the rest of the three-day journey at high warp had turned out to be mostly problem-free and both Hopkins and Xylion agreed that the technology was sound, reassuring Michael that it should be able to take *Eagle* all the way to the Pleiades once the time finally came.

Of course, the trip from the Federation core to Arkaria and the Amargosa Diaspora, deeper inside the Beta Quadrant was merely a stone's throw compared to the far more distant star cluster.

"Disengaging warp drive in five, four, three, two, one."

True to Culsten's countdown, the starfield that had seemingly streaked past *Eagle* for the last three days returned once more to its only slightly less deceptive fixed state and Michael could once more feel the slight groan of the ship's deck plates as *Eagle* returned to the calmer surrounds of normal space after their seventy-two-hour sprint.

"At least disengaging the warp sled is much less complicated than getting it to start up," said Deen from operations. "Location confirmed. We are just outside the Arkaria system. One final warp jump should get us where we need to be."

As a safety precaution, they had avoided setting a course that would have had them drop out of warp right inside a populated system or for that matter even pointed at one with what amounted to a super-powered missile strapped to the outer hull. If something had gone wrong with the shutdown sequence, *Eagle* would have found itself barreling right through empty space instead of needlessly endangering a populated planetary system.

"Mister Xylion, Miss Alendra, if you would be so kind as to get us out of our rocket pack. I think it's time for us to part ways again," said Michael, offering Tazla Star a quick smirk that she quickly reciprocated.

"Beginning decoupling sequence," announced the science officer. "Sled drives are powering down."

“Antimatter generators on the sled deactivated. Main power reduced to standby mode,” added Alendra from the engineering station at the rear of the bridge. “Now disengaging umbilicals.”

“ODN connections are disconnected. The warp sled is now in autonomous operational mode,” said Xylion.

“All umbilicals and connectors are released, Captain. We are clear to maneuver away from the sled,” said Alendra and turned to the command area.

Michael nodded. “Helm, push us off, maneuvering thrusters only. Nice and easy, Lif.”

Culsten began to tap away at his console. “Thrusters engaged. Pushing off at ten meters per second.”

Star turned to her own console and after activating the right commands, the view screen angle changed to show the bulky warp sled that *Eagle* had been attached to over the last few days slowly moving away.

“It’s certainly not much to look at,” said Deen.

“It did its job,” said Leva.

“Eventually,” she added.

“Distance now one thousand kilometers,” said Culsten, keeping a close eye on his instruments.

“Mister Leva, make a note of its location. It wouldn’t do if we lost Starfleet R&Ds newest toy out here,” said Michael.

Leva nodded. “Location marked in the log.”

Star glanced at the ceiling. “Bridge to engineering.”

A response came quickly. “*Engineering. Hopkins here.*”

“How does that new engine look? Are we ready to turn our own power back on?” Star asked.

“*Ready whenever you are.*”

Michael rose from his chair. “What’s the status of the engine overall? I appreciate you didn’t get nearly as much time to configure it as you would have liked.”

“*That’s true, sir,*” she responded. “*I can give you anything up to warp eight with a fair amount of confidence. But I’d rather not strain her too quickly until we’ve had more time to work out all the kinks.*”

Star frowned at that and considered the captain. “I don’t like the idea of not having a fully powered warp engine at our disposal. Feels like we’ve got one hand tied behind our backs.”

He nodded, feeling much the same way.

But Hopkins responded before he had a chance. "*The engine is rated up to warp nine point nine six and I can probably give you that in a crunch if you really need it. I'd just rather not go too fast for a little while.*"

"Message received, Lieutenant," said Michael. "We'll try to be accommodating. And we won't need a whole lot of power to get us into Arkaria."

Culsten picked that one up. "No, sir. A quick warp-two jump will get us there in a few minutes. Will hardly even have to touch that dial."

"Excellent, lay in the course and engage when ready," said Michael, and once Hopkins was off the comm again, making sure to oversee a warp engine that had laid mostly dormant over the last three days.

Moments later *Eagle* engaged her own power. And not long after that, they were already inbound on the green-hued planet of Arkaria Prime.

"Approaching the planet at half impulse, sir," said Culsten.

Michael could already spot the large Remmler Array in the planet's orbit consisting of two massive, grid-shaped planar generators that were designed to expose any ship docked inside the array and between the generators with powerful baryon sweeps to eliminate particles that accumulated on a starship's hull when traveling at warp speed. Since more dangerous baryon particles that could interfere with the safe operation of starships were particularly common around dense star clusters like the Amargosa Diaspora, the Remmler Array in the Arkaria system was well-patronized and it came as little surprise then that a starship was currently being prepared to be serviced by the array.

From what Michael could tell it was a Starfleet vessel and a familiar one at that.

"It's the *Agamemnon*, sir," said Deen and turned in her chair to glance at him. "Did you know she was out here?"

He shook his head. This was news to him. However, in hindsight, he realized that he shouldn't have been surprised. Not since he already suspected that Amaya Donners, the captain of the *Agamemnon* and his close friend from his Academy days, had been

working with his late father, having apparently met with him just days before his sudden passing on Earth.

He could feel Star's eyes on him as well. It wasn't a well-kept secret that he and Amaya had become more than friends recently. She most likely wondered how it was that he had not known that she was out here, at the exact same place they had been called to on short notice and after their well-planned and prepared exploration mission to the Pleiades had been so suddenly suspended.

He was wondering the exact same thing.

"We are receiving a message from the *Agamemnon*, sir," said Leva from the tactical station. "Captain Donners is requesting permission to beam onboard."

Michael nodded. "Lif, get us in transporter range, I'll be in transporter room two," he said and quickly departed the bridge.

Amaya Donners materialized on the transporter pad just moments after he had stepped into the room. Her brilliant eyes found him quickly. "Permission to come aboard."

He nodded and watched her step down the platform. "Fancy meeting you here."

She offered him a little grin. "I was in the neighborhood."

"Sounds to me there is a bit more to it than that."

The tall, caramel-skinned starship captain nodded. "Perhaps. And I promise I'll tell you all about it. But first I need you to head towards Arkaria IX. I'll hitch a ride with you if you don't mind since my ship's in the shop right now."

"Is that where we're meeting Jarik?" he said.

She answered with a subdued nod even while she was already heading for the doors. Michael may have won that race to the captain's chair they had both embarked on even while they had still been cadets, but here, on his ship, she was behaving like a veteran Starfleet commander, no longer used to waiting for others and expecting people to follow her lead.

He tailed her out of the room and into the corridor as she confidently headed for the nearest turbolift as if she was still on her own ship. "Are you going to tell me anything about why I'm here? Not that I'm not glad to see you again since we had so little time together on Earth."

In truth, he still felt a slight tinge of bitterness that he had found out that Maya had not only been on Earth while he had been there, he was also fairly confident she had at one point been in the same building but had not found it necessary to reach out to him until his father's funeral.

It had been a little over a year now since they had taken their relationship to a new level, and thanks to the war and their busy schedules, they had managed to see each other in person only a handful of times during that period. Starship captains tended to partake in the most extreme version of long-distance relationships simply by virtue of their chosen occupation. It made it all the more frustrating that she had chosen not to take advantage of their most recent opportunity to spend time together during a time when he could have used the company.

They stepped into the turbolift together and it was she who called out for the bridge as their destination. She glanced at him for a moment before she spoke, perhaps sensing what he was thinking. "Michael, I'm really sorry about your father. He was a —"

"Great man, yes, I know," he said with perhaps a little more annoyance than he had planned. "Forgive me, but I've heard that line quite a bit lately."

She nodded. "I know that you and your father didn't get along very well and I understand that there's a difference between a public persona and the one shared by friends and family. I can see how he could not have been an easy man to live with."

"Not to mention having him as your father."

"Regardless of how challenging this may have been for you; he was still your father and I wish I could've been there for you after he passed. Trust me, if I could have been I would have," she said, sounding sincere.

"You don't have to apologize to me for being a Starfleet captain."

They arrived on the bridge and once again it was she who walked out first, striding onto the bridge as if she owned the place. Michael tried not let it bother him.

"Captain Donners," Star said as she stood and greeted the other woman. "Welcome on board."

“Commander Star,” she said and shook hands with the Trill. “It is good to meet you again.”

Michael thought it was remarkable how easy it came to Amaya to pretend to like somebody. He was fairly certain that she didn’t think much of his formerly disgraced first officer, she had pretty much told him as much after she had learned that she had been assigned to *Eagle*. It was impossible to discern any of that from the bright smile she offered Star. The brief greeting also made him realize that they had shared no physical contact at all after she had arrived in the transporter room, not even something as innocuous as a handshake.

“You look well, Dee,” she told DeMara next. “One of these days you will have to share that Tenarian secret with me that keeps you eternally young.”

“You look very well yourself, Captain,” she responded with an equally friendly smile. “I don’t believe you need any tips from me.” DeMara had briefly served with Amaya at the same time as Michael had on the ill-fated *Columbia* under the late Captain Mendez.

With the greetings out of the way, all eyes turned expectedly towards Michael again, anticipating new instructions, including Maya’s who may have felt comfortable on another captain’s bridge but was well aware that there were certain lines you didn’t cross. One of which was to give orders to somebody else’s crew.

“Mister Culsten, get us to Arkaria IX please.”

“Aye, sir. Course set, engaging at full impulse. ETA, fifteen minutes.”

He noticed that Amaya kept her eyes on the Krellonian officer at the helm for a little longer than was necessary. Considering what Throl had told him about their mission, he thought he knew why. “Gives us a little time to catch up,” he said to her and pointed at the doors leading to his ready room. “Can I offer you a drink?”

She shook her head. “I think it would be better if I prepared for our next meeting. I’ll see you back in the transporter room in fifteen,” she said and then raised a hand when he was about to speak up again. “No need for an escort,” she said with a playful smile that felt designed to deflect from her brusque attitude. “I tend to know my way around a starship.” With that, she quickly ducked back into the turbolift.

Both Star and Deen quickly returned to their duties, trying to avoid eye contact with the obviously snubbed captain.

Michael quietly took his seat, trying and failing to avoid the awkwardness that had suddenly settled over the bridge.

## 7

Starfleet's Department of Special Affairs and Investigations had an obvious affinity for underground installations, Michael Owens mused after he had visited his father's out-of-the-way base located underneath an old diamond mine located in Siberia on Earth just a few weeks earlier and now, after having beamed into what looked like yet another subterranean facility below the surface of the ninth planet of the Arkaria system.

However, while the Russian base had clearly been a Starfleet installation with the same streamlined interior design to give it the look and feel that was so common among ships and bases throughout the Federation, the facility on Arkaria IX had obviously been designed by someone with very different aesthetic sensibilities and that seemed to predate Starfleet by a few centuries at least.

Michael took a moment to appreciate the wide and high, slightly inward curved corridors that almost appeared as if they had been designed for a people much taller than the average humanoid. The décor was mostly painted in dark brownish and amber colors and there was a noticeable alien hieroglyph-like script running along the walls he didn't recognize.

He had a strong suspicion that this place had not been built by the inhabitants of Arkaria Prime and was tempted to ask Amaya about it to satisfy his own curiosity.

His fellow starship captain, however, had remained uncharacteristically aloof ever since she had come aboard and even more so now after they had beamed down into this mysterious place.

He had an inkling that he could thank his father for Amaya's sudden need for secretiveness, a trait that had been very much his calling card and a never-ending source of frustration for him. His

father was gone but it seemed that he had managed to pull other people he cared about into his web of secrecy and lies. It was difficult not to resent him for that.

That Amaya was heavily involved with whatever was happening here was obvious since she led him through the maze of wide corridors with the confidence of somebody who had been here before, even nodding at a few people they encountered with familiarity.

Like the base in Russia, this one too was staffed with a mixture of Starfleet officers and non-uniformed civilian personnel.

After a few mostly quiet minutes traversing the complex, they reached a large oval-shaped room that seemed to function as a control center judging by the many computer stations arranged here and personnel monitored various screens. A partition had been set up at the far end that separated a meeting area of sorts comprised of a large and round conference table surrounded by several chairs, one of which was occupied by Jarik.

The tall Vulcan man quickly stood upon seeing them entering the room, a large smile decorating his lips as he approached *Eagle's* captain. "Michael, good to see you again, old friend," he said and quickly grabbed his hand before following it up with a friendly hug.

Jarik was wearing a red-collared Starfleet uniform with four pips decorating the collar of his shirt. But whereas his and Maya's insignia identified them as captains, Jarik's pips were arranged on top of a straight gold bar, denoting a senior administrative role.

The Vulcan took a step back and considered them both, his smile remaining on his face. "Feels a bit like an Academy reunion, doesn't it?"

Michael had to admit that there was some truth to that. He and Jarik had been roommates when they had both been cadets in San Francisco while Amaya had been just down the hall. They had been close friends at the time even if Michael had always suspected that Jarik and Amaya would not have been close if it hadn't been for him. Regardless of their shared relationship at the Academy, he couldn't help but feel like the odd man out.

He nodded. "It does. But I suppose this isn't exactly a happy reunion."

Jarik shook his head. "The circumstances aren't ideal, no. And I fully appreciate that this caught you by surprise and that you were all but ready to head off into the great unknown to make what I'm sure would have been great new discoveries. I can only imagine how much you must have looked forward to that and I'm truly sorry to have to pull you away from such a grand opportunity."

"I'm sure there'll be time for that later and once we've dealt with this latest crisis."

"I hope so, Michael," Jarik said and then seemed to hesitate for a moment. "I know you've heard this quite a bit lately, and I know I've already offered my condolences to you back on Earth but I just wanted to say again how sorry I am for Jon."

Michael nodded. "Thank you."

There was a moment of awkward silence before Jarik continued. "And thank you for coming all the way out here so promptly," he said and gestured toward one of the many empty chairs. Michael took the proffered seat while Jarik and Amaya took chairs opposite him. "Looks like that new warp sled our friends at R&D have cooked up really came through, huh?"

"We had a few initial troubles with it but overall, yes, it worked quite well," he said and then decided to cut to the chase. "I understand that there is a medical crisis on a Krellonian colony that we might be able to help out with."

He didn't miss the brief glance exchanged between his two friends.

Jarik nodded. "That is correct."

"And that *Eagle* was specifically requested for this mission."

"Also true and I suppose you're wondering why that is," Jarik said.

"I have my suspicions. Not many Starfleet ships have a Krellonian crewmember onboard."

Jarik nodded. "Mister Culsten seems to have some very important connections in his government from the little we could determine."

"But there is more going on here than the Krellonians asking for help with a medical emergency, isn't there? Otherwise, I wouldn't be sitting here and I'd be on my way into Krellon space as we speak."

His two academy friends exchanged yet another look, giving him seemingly indisputable evidence that he was on the right track.

Jarik leaned forward slightly even if that did next to nothing about the physical distance between them considering that he had chosen to sit on the exact opposite side of the large round table. "Michael, I know of course how your father worked and the secrets he liked to keep but let me assure you, that is not how I wish to operate. Especially not with you. I believe in being upfront with people I work with, particularly when I'm convinced that I can count on their discretion and integrity. But before I go into any details, would you mind telling me what it was Jon told you about the work we were doing when you came to see us on Earth?"

Michael considered them briefly from across the table and couldn't entirely shake the feeling that he was being interviewed. He had, of course, worked with Amaya closely before and liked to think that he knew her well. And that was not counting his other, more personal feelings towards her.

Jarik was a different story. They had been close while they had attended the Academy together but that had been many years ago and they had lost touch shortly after graduating. He had not truly spoken to him again up until recently when he had been surprised to find that he had been working with his father.

He ultimately decided that it was only fair to give Jarik the benefit of the doubt, after all, it could not have been easy to step into his father's shoes, a man who had headed the enigmatic Department of Special Affairs and Investigations for decades, and in doing so, Michael was convinced, shaping it into the organization it had become.

"Not much," he said and shook his head. "You were there for most of it. He was insistent that I come to work for him and was incredibly reluctant to share anything about the work he was doing other than to stress how terribly important it was. All I was able to figure out was that it was related to something called Operation Myriad. From what I've been able to tell, there is no operation by that name anywhere in Starfleet records."

"Not in official records, no," said Jarik. "But it is what we are working on here and it is a serious threat to the Federation."

"What kind of threat?"

“Before I go any further, I just want to make it clear that what I’m about to tell you is highly classified. I’m happy to read you into our work here because I think you will need to know, but I must ask you not to share this information with anyone else below your security clearance,” he added and glanced at the woman at his side. “Amaya agreed to that same stipulation when she first came on board.”

Michel sighed. “I don’t like secrets. Certainly not those I have to keep from my crew. Having said that, I can appreciate how they might be necessary in our line of work.”

Jarik nodded. “Seven years ago, while surveying this area of space, the *Enterprise* made contact with a race of solanogen-based beings native to subspace carrying out a series of gruesome experiments on *Enterprise* crewmembers by abducting them and sending them back onto the ship with no knowledge of what had been done to them.”

“I think I remember a briefing on this,” he said. “You believe that this race is abducting people again?”

The Vulcan shook his head. “No. We believe that they intend on carrying out a full-fledged invasion of our space.”

He shot him an incredulous look. “How is that even possible? Solanogen cannot exist outside of subspace.”

“True. However, we have compelling intelligence that these beings have been developing some sort of subspace portal that would allow them to transition into normal space. In fact, we believe that the experimentations they’ve carried out seven years ago were part of a larger plan to lay the ground works for this impending invasion. We have confirmed reports that what happened on the *Enterprise* was not an isolated incident and that people all over this sector have been abducted, studied, and experimented on—” Jarik stopped himself when he was gripped by a short coughing fit.

Maya turned to him, offering her support, but he quickly waved her off. “I’m alright,” he said and looked back at Michael. “As I was saying, everything they have done is leading to what we believe to be an imminent attempt to gain a foothold in normal space and this sector. Everything we know about these beings has given us reason to believe that their intentions are hostile and a grave threat to the Federation.”

Michael needed a moment to digest this before he spoke again. "This is what had my father so worried? Why he insisted that I joined him?"

"Your father and I had been working on this for years and long before we realized the true scope of the threat we were facing. It has only been over the last few months that we started to understand the full extent of their designs. Michael, this is an enemy we still don't know how to fight. And I probably don't have to tell you that we cannot afford another war so soon after the last one."

He rubbed his temples as he continued to try and process this dire news. "What is Starfleet doing about this?" he said and made eye contact with Jarik again. "I understand that you and SAI have been working on this, but surely, if this is such a significant threat, and if it is originating from this sector of space, why haven't we amassed a defensive force yet?"

Jarik offered a heavy sigh. "Starfleet Command is not fully convinced of the nature of this threat even if the evidence keeps mounting. They have only recently given us the go-ahead to pursue this further and allocate resources such as *Amaya* and *Agamemnon*, but until we provide more concrete proof, Command will not divert any additional resources to Operation Myriad."

"And I suppose you're about to tell me that this is where I come in?"

Jarik offered a little smile that people who were not aware of his mixed heritage may have found disturbing. "Precisely. Your father was convinced, and I tend to agree, that while these beings carried out their experiments, they were looking for and found a willing partner for their plans right here in this sector."

Michael nodded, seeing now where this was going. "The Krellonians."

"Yes. Regardless of what technology they may possess to allow them to enter normal space, it is unlikely that they would be able to accomplish this without any assistance from our side. The Krellonians are the perfect partners and since we are not exactly on the best of terms with them, we can't just show up on their doorstep and ask them if they are in league with an alien race living in subspace and attempting to invade us."

“So this is an intelligence operation under the guise of an aid mission,” said Michael, not feeling particularly fond of the idea and unable to keep this out of the tone of his voice. “This medical emergency is taking us to one of the least significant colony worlds of a highly xenophobic people. The chance that we will be able to uncover much of anything there seems doubtful.”

Jarik nodded in agreement. “I am not saying that this is not a long shot. But this opportunity is just too good for us to pass up. We don't know how imminent this invasion is. This could be happening tomorrow, next week, or next year. We simply need more information and if there is any chance that we can get a clearer picture courtesy of the influence your helmsman can provide then we cannot afford not to take that chance.”

“What about the aid mission itself?” Michael asked.

“The Krellonians have not told us much,” Amaya said. “But we do know it is serious and that people in their colony are dying in large numbers.”

Jarik took it from there. “Naturally, your mission is to do whatever you can to help the Krellonians fight this thing. The Diplomatic Corps believes this to be an important opportunity to improve our relationship with the Star Alliance and I don't disagree. But I'd rather gain actionable intelligence on a pending invasion that could kill billions rather than try and save one Krellonian colony.”

Michael frowned at that. “I'm not going to weigh lives here.”

Jarik shook his head. “I'm not asking you to. Your mission is to do what you can on both fronts. Nothing more and nothing less.”

The room fell silent again save for the background noise of the personnel working in the adjacent section.

“We'll approach this from two angles,” Jarik continued after a moment. “While you head to the Piquis system, Amaya will continue a search we already began before you arrived. It is not much better than trying to find that proverbial needle in a star cluster, but since we know what we are looking for thanks to information gathered by the *Enterprise* years ago, it is possible that we can find that subspace portal before it can be used against us.”

“Those sound like two equally desperate measures,” said Michael.

Jaris stood. "Unfortunately, at this point, we are desperate. And we are also on a tight schedule. The Krellonians are expecting you, Michael, and the longer we delay the less likely we might be able to learn anything from them. *Agamemnon* will accompany you into the Amargosa Diaspora until you'll need to part ways. I'll make sure you have a full briefing package sent to you. But I will have to ask you once more to keep what you've learned here confidential for the time being."

Michael followed suit, leaving his chair and a moment later so did Amaya. "That won't be easy. Not if I will have to rely on Lieutenant Culsten to establish some sort of contact with officials that might know about this alliance."

"I trust you to make the right call Michael and find a way to share only what is absolutely necessary while maintaining operational confidentiality," said Jarik and rounded the conference table to approach him again.

Michael nodded and then glanced at his fellow captain. "Maya, do you mind giving us the room for a moment?"

She offered him a surprised look and then sought agreement on Jarik's face who quickly provided it. "I'll return to *Agamemnon* and we'll set out as soon as you're back on *Eagle*," she said and began heading out of the conference room.

"Maya," Michael said to her back.

She stopped and turned around.

"Let's catch up later."

She offered a sharp nod but said nothing further before she left.

Michael turned his attention back to Jarik. "Is it just me or does she seem a little off?"

He shrugged. "She's had a lot on her mind lately. Don't blame her if she's not the same person she was during the good old days."

He nodded slightly, not entirely convinced.

"What is it you wanted to talk to me about? I already told you, I don't want to work like Jon did. I don't believe in keeping secrets unless absolutely necessary."

"I just wanted to know how you're feeling?"

His facial expression turned quizzical for a moment, clearly not having anticipated the question. "I'm fine, Michael."

He nodded and then took a few steps away from his old friend, considering his next words carefully. "You asked me earlier what my father told me back on Earth."

"Yes?"

He turned back to face him. "I didn't want to say anything in front of Maya, but he did mention some concerns."

"What kind of concerns?"

"About you. I think part of the reason he was so insistent that I joined him was because he felt that your condition might start affecting your work. He was worried about you, Jarik."

The half-Vulcan looked dumbstruck. But only for a moment. His features quickly hardened. "What did he tell you about my condition?"

He shook his head. "Not much. Just that it was some sort of genetic disease. And that you have been starting to show symptoms."

It wasn't difficult to tell that he didn't like hearing this. He turned away for a moment as if to hide the emotions this revelation had awoken within him, living up to his Vulcan side for just an instant or so. He uttered a short but humorless laugh, quickly dispelling once again any kind of doubt that he was much closer to his human heritage. "I guess it's hard to keep a secret from a man who had made it his mission in life to collect them."

"Is it true?"

He nodded without facing the other man. "A few years ago I was diagnosed with Darnay's disease."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," he said, fully aware that there was no cure for Darnay's.

Jarik turned around. "I am not at the terminal stage yet. So let me be very clear, regardless of what Jon may have told you, I am still fully able to perform whatever duties are required of me. I can manage the symptoms with regular injections and the doctors have assured me that I still have a couple of good years left. I will not let this disease beat me and I most definitely won't let it affect our work here."

He nodded slowly. "Does Maya know?"

He shook his head. "And I'd prefer if you didn't tell her this. I know I said that I don't like to keep secrets but, in this instance, I think it would be better for everyone if we could keep this between

us. I will tell her when the time is right. Hopefully, this crisis will be long behind us by the time my body and mind will start failing me."

"I can respect that. But you have to promise me that you will step away from this if you realize that you can no longer do what must be done. SAI has already lost one leader who refused to look after his own health, I don't want this job to do to you what it did to my father."

He held out his hand. "You have my word, Michael."

They shook and soon after they parted ways again so that Michael could return to *Eagle* and begin the next and most crucial part of his new mission. Prevent an inter-dimensional invasion.

How exactly he was going to accomplish this, he had no idea.

## 8

Even at warp, the Amargosa Diaspora was quite the sight to behold. A starscape of countless suns arranged in close proximity to each other, ranging from the ultra-hot and bright dark-blue main sequence stars to white and orange giants all the way up to the dimmer and cooler M-types.

It was also quite a challenge to navigate, requiring ship pilots to make constant, minor course corrections and limiting their cruising speed to warp seven.

And yet Michael Owens' focus remained not on the mesmerizing background vista or the hard work being carried out on the bridge by his helmsmen, but on that other starship, traveling in close formation just a few short kilometers to their starboard bow and readily discernible from the windows of his quarters.

It had been six hours since he had received his briefing on Arkaria IX and both *Eagle* and *Agamemnon* had set out for Krellonian space. He had tried to reach out to Amaya twice during that time with no success.

"Lieutenant Deen to Captain Owens."

Her voice had not come over the comm system but from much closer. He diverted his eyes from the windows to the other side of the table he was sitting at to see DeMara returning his look expectantly.

“The bread.”

It took him a moment to realize that she was asking him to pass the tray filled with freshly replicated toast slices that sat on his side of the breakfast table and that she had likely asked for at least once before while he had been distracted with his thoughts. “Of course, sorry,” he said as he reached for the tray and passed it along.

“You still haven’t told me what this mission is all about,” she said as she took a couple of slices and began to butter them up. “You know the rumor mill is in full effect. Clearly more is happening here than just a relief mission.”

He frowned. He was still not comfortable that the crew, especially his senior officers, were left in the dark about their latest assignment and he knew he had to change this soon. Jarik's instructions had been clear regarding the confidentiality requirements for the mission, but he had to find ways to read in people he trusted and whose support he was going to depend on for the next few days, or otherwise, this mission was doomed before it had even started. “I’ll schedule a briefing soon.”

“That’s not what has you so distracted this morning though, is it?”

Michael uttered a sigh, realizing that he wouldn’t be able to keep his true thoughts from the perceptive Tenarian. “It’s Amaya.”

“Right,” she said and quickly went back to finish preparing her toast with fruit-based preserves.

“She’s been very distant lately, ever since the funeral when I realized that we had both been on Earth at the same time. And then talking to her yesterday, it almost felt as if we were strangers.”

“I’m probably not the right person to offer relationship advice,” she said without making eye contact. “But sometimes people just drift apart.”

He nodded slowly even if he had a hard time understanding why this would have been the case with Amaya. She had given him no signs at all over the last year or so and after their relationship had become more than mere friendship that she had regretted the path they had embarked upon. “Maybe,” he said, hoping that this was not

the case but also not quite missing that his breakfast companion seemed somewhat disinterested in this topic of conversation. She had appeared rather dispassionate about a number of things lately, and he couldn't help wonder if perhaps her suspended performance was to blame. He knew that his critique certainly hadn't helped matters.

He felt that he needed to clear the air; it wouldn't do having two important people in his life being annoyed with him at the same time.

But before he could broach the subject, the comm system piped through an actual message into his quarters. *"Bridge to Captain."*

He recognized So'Dan Leva's voice. "Owens here. Go ahead, Commander."

*"Sir, we've just received a message from the Agamemnon. Captain Donners is requesting permission to beam aboard."*

He exchanged a surprised glance with DeMara who merely shrugged "Very good. Permission granted. I'll meet her in transporter room two."

*"I'll relay the message."*

"Owens out."

DeMara grabbed a half-eaten slice of toast from her plate and stood. "Well, sounds like your worries were unfounded."

"Yeah," he said, halfheartedly. "But still, doesn't this all feel a little forced to you? Requesting formal permission, relaying messages via the bridge? That's not really her style."

"She's following protocol, Michael, you can't fault her for that," she said and headed for the doors.

"You finished?"

She shook her head. "I just thought I'd give you two some privacy."

He left his chair. "You don't have to go," he said but realized, even as he was saying the words, that in truth, he wanted her to.

And she could see it too. She was kind enough not to call him out on his bluff. "I should get back to the bridge anyway. There are a lot of stars out there; it helps to have a couple of extra eyeballs focused on sensors," she said and then left without waiting for his response.

He walked over to his washroom to quickly freshen up and brush his hair before he'd head out to greet Amaya in the transporter

room. On his way towards the exit, he stopped, thinking of something else. "Computer, play some ambient music. American Blues. Early to mid-Twentieth century," he said, knowing that Amaya was partial to that genre of music.

The computer quickly trilled in acknowledgment and filled his quarters with the gentle but sorrowful tones of a singer of a long bygone age, strumming his guitar.

Not a moment after, the annunciator to his quarters notified him of a visitor which to Michael felt like a rather inconvenient time. He quickly stepped up to the doors and they opened to reveal Amaya Donners already standing there.

"Hey," he said surprised. "I was just coming to get you."

She stepped into his quarters after he had moved aside to give her room. "You know me, never the patient sort."

He turned to face her and allowed the doors to close behind him. "Well, I'm glad you came over."

She spotted the food on the table. "Did I interrupt breakfast?"

He shrugged it off. "Not really. Want to join me?"

She looked over the second table setting. "Dee?" she asked.

"Yes. She just left."

She nodded but made no move to sit at the table.

"I can get you a plate," he said and headed for the replicator.

"No need," she said. "I won't be staying long."

He stopped halfway to the replicator and turned back. "Oh?"

He guessed it wasn't difficult for her to spot the disappointment on his face and she uttered a little sigh. "Listen, Michael; I know things between us have cooled a little bit."

He offered a smile. "I guess. We're both pretty busy people after all."

She nodded but didn't reciprocate the smile. "That's right. I mean look at us. We're so busy that for the majority of the time we can't even see each other in person. Every time we try to arrange leave together something comes up either on my side or yours. And then, the one-time coincidence puts us in the same place at the same time, all I get to do is express my condolences to you, almost in passing, after your father died."

"I don't blame you for that. And I appreciate you made the time for the funeral."

She took a step toward the window as if to study her own ship in closer detail. "This isn't about blame. It's about the practicality of two starship captains being more to each other than just friends. We both have an enormous amount of responsibility placed on us. Now with this latest crisis, perhaps more so than ever since the end of the war."

Michael was not willing to give in so quickly. He took a step closer to her. "We made it work during the war, and it wasn't easy for either one of us then."

She finally turned to look him in the eye. She didn't speak right away.

"What are you saying here? You want to break this off?"

"What is *this* anyway?" she said. "You and me? What would you call it? It's not really a relationship in the real sense of the word. Talking to each other every other week or so, seeing each other maybe every other year, and worrying for most of the rest of the time."

"I'll always worry about you."

She scowled at him, and he realized that he had phrased that wrong. "What I mean is that we have been friends for a long time. And we'll always be friends. Worrying about each other is what friends tend to do. It shows that we care."

She nodded slightly, acceding to that point. "Yes, but it's easier when there is less pressure."

"Pressure?" he said, finding her word choice a little peculiar.

She seemed to sense it too and began to rub the bridge of her nose in apparent frustration. Whatever she had come here to say, it was apparently not going quite the way she had envisioned it.

"Listen, I just think we need to slow things down a bit. At least until this crisis is over."

"There'll always be some sort of crisis."

She said nothing.

He nodded, the message was clear enough. "Very well. Let's focus on this mission and saving the galaxy before we decide where this other thing between us is going."

Her smile felt forced and never quite reached her eyes.

"Thanks."

She pointed at the ceiling to indicate the music that was playing over the speakers. "I love Huddie Ledbetter."

"Lead Belly. I know," he said. "Ever since you've told me that you grew up in the same place he was born. Tiny town in the bayou."

Her smile widened slightly. "Yeah, I guess I do like to tell that story."

They remained in quiet reflection for a spell while the four-hundred-year-old singer lamented over where his girl had been and where she was going to go.

The song came to an end, and Amaya headed for the doors. Then she stopped, reached into her uniform jacket, and dug out a thin isolar chip from an inside pocket. She handed it over to him. "I almost forgot about this."

"What is it?" he asked as he took the plastic strip.

"It's from your father. He asked me to give it to you before..."

She didn't have to finish the sentence, and the look in her pained eyes made it clear that she didn't want to talk about it further either. She left without saying another word.

His eyes lingered on those now closed doors for a moment, unable to stop wondering where he had gone wrong to allow it to get to this point and why he had not tried harder from letting her go.

Michael glanced down at the chip in his hand. If it had really come from his father as she had claimed, he had to wonder why he had given it to her instead of just passing this on to him directly. But then again, trying to understand anything his father had done while he had still been alive had often seemed like a mostly futile gesture.

He walked over to his desk, sat down in front of his desktop monitor, and slotted the chip into the interface.

The music immediately stopped playing and the image of his father, alive and well, appeared on the screen. Based on the background and the time index, the message had been recorded just a day before his death at his base in Far East Russia and after he had visited him there.

It was an odd feeling seeing him alive again, knowing that this was likely the last message he had ever recorded, at least to him.

*"Son, I will have to keep this short. I know that you are not inclined to accept my offer to come and work for me. God knows you inherited that stubbornness from both your mother and me. To be honest, I didn't really*

*expect you to. You are a starship captain, and I suppose at heart, that's what you'll always be. I've never truly had that same drive, but I recognize it in men and women who have made it their life's mission to sit in that chair and try to change the galaxy for the better.*

*I am trying to do the same thing but on a much larger scale and I will need your help doing it."*

He looked off-screen for a brief moment, reflecting on what he had said. Or perhaps on what he was about to say next.

*"We've had our differences in the past; I understand this. And I also understand that some of it, maybe the majority of it, was because I involved myself far too much in your life and tried to do the same thing with your brother before he – left us. But you have to believe that I always had a good reason for doing so. That there was more at stake than the happiness of one family."*

He sighed, and it was clear he didn't exactly relish going down that particular road again and reopening old wounds.

*"Michael, I said I would need your help, and I understand that you are not willing to do so based on the very little I've been able to share with you so far. But regardless if you end up deciding to join me here or not, I truly hope that I will be able to rely on you with whatever may happen going forward."*

Jonathan Owens uttered a little laugh, amused by his own words.

*"I've gotten a little bit too comfortable with my own secrets. Forgive an old man for being overly cautious with information that could be fatally dangerous in the wrong hands. I promise I will be able to tell you more soon,"* he said before his face became much more serious once again. *"In the meantime, and no matter what will happen in the days and weeks, maybe months, down the road, there is just one thing that I need you to promise me.*

*Don't trust anyone."*

And then the message stopped, and his father's face disappeared.

Michael was flabbergasted.

And he was angry. Angry with a man he had spent most of his life being irked with and only just realizing that even after his death, this would not soon change.

*"Goddammit, dad, what have you gotten me into?"*

He studied the expressions on her face carefully while she watched the same message he had played just a few hours earlier but he once again found that Tazla Star had seemingly perfected the art of disguising her true feelings underneath a practically unreadable mask of inscrutability that would have made a Vulcan proud.

Michael Owens had wrestled with the idea of showing his father's recording to his first officer, a notion that would have been unthinkable just a year earlier and after she had joined the crew as a very much unwelcomed and distrusted addition to what he had always considered the tight-knit senior staff of *Eagle*. It had taken some time until he had been comfortable with having a woman who had briefly been a captain before being court-martialed and imprisoned for disregarding orders at his side. The fact that she had been found out to have been working for a shady group within Starfleet Intelligence that may not have always had the Federation's best interest at heart, hadn't helped much either.

Things had evolved quite a bit since those early days.

After first reviewing his father's message, and then replaying it several times afterward to ensure he had not missed any subtle nuances possibly hidden within the message, he found himself with the dilemma that the people he needed to rely on for this mission, were the exact same people his father had explicitly warned him against.

Regardless of what he had been told since the very auspicious beginning of this assignment that had started with Admiral Throl's unexpected visit, he knew that he needed a second opinion on everything he had learned so far.

Normally that person would have been DeMara Deen who had always functioned as one of his most trusted advisors and a reliable sounding board pretty much ever since he had watched her grow from a child into a young woman as well as an extraordinarily capable officer.

But since DeMara had been acting increasingly detached over the last few weeks, he had decided to bring Tazla Star into his confidence instead, and disregarding both the instructions he had been given by Jarik and his father's warning, he had not only presented her with the recording but also brought her fully up to speed on what he had learned about the mission to prevent an inter-dimensional invasion by a subspace dwelling species.

*"In the meantime, and no matter what will happen in the days and weeks, maybe months, down the road, there is just one thing that I need you to promise me. Don't trust anyone."*

The recording came to an end and Tazla Star leaned back in the chair she had been occupying, sitting opposite Michael, at his desk. She uttered a particularly colorful Trill curse under her breath.

He nodded as he turned the monitor back around so that it faced him once more even if his father's face was now no longer displayed. "That's precisely how I felt after seeing this."

"Who do you think he's referring to?" she asked.

He shrugged. "That's the problem. I don't know. And I don't know how to find out either. It could be Throl. It could be Jarik or Maya. It could be all three of them and others. It could be nothing more than the paranoid delusions of a dying man."

He knew he didn't do a good job of hiding his frustration. This message had thrown pretty much everything in doubt. Not just his mission, he could also not help himself but wonder if perhaps Amaya had been given a similar message, perhaps she had been told not to trust him, which certainly could explain her sudden change in attitude towards him.

Or perhaps his father had been right in saying that she could not be trusted, perhaps something was wrong with her. The thought of all the questions this vague message had raised, all the possibilities they suddenly evoked, was driving him crazy and making him so much angrier with his father for having put him in this position. And then, of course, he had the audacity of dying suddenly, robbing him of any chance to be able to confront him about these suspicions and demanding answers for once and for all.

In short, Jonathan Owens had shaken to his core, his confidence in the people he needed to believe in.

"I don't think it would be wise to dismiss it entirely."

Michael uttered a heavy sigh and stood from his chair to walk over to the man-high window in his ready room that currently gave him, not only a great view of the Amargosa stellar nursery they were traversing but also of the starship *Agamemnon* that continued to travel with them at warp in close formation. "And therein lies the problem. I can't afford to do anything less but heed the warning, even if there is a chance that it is nothing more than baseless paranoia. Not while we might be facing an imminent invasion by a technologically advanced and hostile force we seem to know next to nothing about," he said and turned around. "But what if he's wrong and this mistrust he has spread is only complicating an already difficult situation? What is the right move here? Can there even be one?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "And it places us in the unenviable position where only people who do know what is going on are possibly the very same people we cannot trust with anything."

Feeling a headache coming on, he began to massage his forehead. "You can see why I didn't get much sleep last night," he said and looked right at her. "What are your thoughts?"

If Star was surprised by her captain's show of faith and trust in her she did well to hide this. She glanced back at the computer screen that was now blank again as if to recall every last word she had heard his late father speak in his enigmatic message. "I have some familiarity with the Department of Special Affairs and Investigations from my work in the intelligence community. I never met your father but I've worked alongside with, and on occasions perhaps even against, members of his agency. They don't exactly work like more traditional intelligence networks, they don't generally run clandestine missions, as far as I'm aware, but they do keep things very much need-to-know. And in my experience, if SAI is involved in something, there is a side they want you to see and then there is the truth."

"I was afraid you'd say something like that," he said and considered her words a bit further. "You said you've never met my father. How about Jarik?"

She shook her head. "To be honest, I know next to nothing about him. Which in itself is unusual. In my experience, people like

that don't usually come out of nowhere. You said you were Academy roommates?"

He nodded and took his seat again. "Yes. Good friends once upon a time before we drifted apart after we graduated. I did some digging. According to his file, he did some unremarkable work within Starfleet's administrative circles before joining my father about ten years ago. Nothing else stands out."

"If you were to look at my file," said Star, "you would find much the same thing about my career up until *Sacajawea*. And it would mostly be a complete fabrication."

"I considered that. The thing is, I actually got a very good feeling about Jarik ever since I met him again on Earth a few weeks ago. Instead of keeping secrets as my father did, he seemed very open with me. I appreciate that it could all be a smokescreen but during the time I knew him at the Academy, Jarik had always been a straight shooter. In that regard, he took after his Vulcan mother. There wasn't a deceitful or malicious bone in his body."

Star seemed to contemplate her next words carefully. "I hate to bring it up, but what about Captain Donners? How much do you think you can trust her?"

"It's a legitimate question," he quickly admitted. "Three weeks ago, I would have said that I'd trust her unconditionally."

"And now?"

He shook his head slightly. "Now I'm not so sure. And I truly hate feeling that way about her."

"I understand. But I would suggest, for the time being, that you remain careful around her. It might be a good idea not to share any of this with either Donners or Jarik," she said, gesturing toward the blank screen.

"I don't think I have a choice. We'll have to keep everything we know between the two of us until further notice and until we have a clearer idea of who we can trust."

"Agreed," she said. "What about the crew? What do you want to tell them?"

Michael thought about this for a moment. It still irked him that he was keeping the people under his command, the people who needed to trust him, in the dark. It was a page straight out of his father's playbook and it didn't sit right with him at all. But trust, he

had painfully come to realize, had become a very dangerous commodity. "Call a briefing for oh-nine-hundred tomorrow morning with the senior staff. As much as I hate it, we won't be able to disclose everything we've learned so far, as little as that might be. But we still have a relief mission to carry out, as well as attempt to gather more intelligence on this invasion and how the Krellonians might fit into all this. We're going to have to rely on one of our own if we want any hope of trying to uncover any possible connections."

Tazla Star offered a sharp nod but even she couldn't entirely hide the glint of doubt in her emerald-colored eyes. There was no point begrudging her over it. Michael felt exactly the same way. And he feared that this doubt wasn't going to go anywhere anytime soon, sticking around like an uninvited guest, lingering somewhere in the background and just out of reach, until that moment it all came crashing down on them with a punishing vengeance.

## Part Two: Do No Harm

### 1

The tension in *Eagle's* observation lounge felt surprisingly high even before the meeting had commenced. Michael thought he had felt it the moment he had stepped into the conference room and the voices of his senior officers had quieted down quickly.

DeMara Deen had hardly made eye contact with him as he stepped up to his seat at the head of the table and So'Dan Leva seemed to be staring off into empty space. Doctor Katanga was clearly in a fouler mood than usual and was taking pains to avoid looking at Tazla Star which in itself was odd since he knew that the two most recent additions to his crew had been close friends for a long time and had rekindled that friendship since they had reunited on *Eagle*.

Commander Xylion also appeared more preoccupied with his own thoughts than he had come to expect from the usually most steadfast member of his crew.

But perhaps most concerning considering the nature of their upcoming mission was the fact that Lif Culsten appeared oddly quiet and uninterested in the ongoing proceedings, having chosen a seat at the far end of the table and not next to Louise Hopkins where he would have normally expected him, usually at the center of any ongoing conversations while liberally cracking jokes. The young chief engineer didn't appear greatly concerned that the Krellonian had chosen not to sit next to her.

The only person who made a rather relaxed impression on him was his Bajoran security chief, the very same person who more often than not was predominately concerned with potential risks to the ship and her crew.

He haphazardly pondered for just a brief moment if he should have asked the ship's counselor to attend today's briefing session as he took his chair. He couldn't help but feel that she would have given him a rather worrisome report about the current mental state of his senior officers.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “I appreciate that the crew might be somewhat puzzled by our unexpected and sudden change of mission and the lack of further details, especially considering all the work and preparation we have put into our mission to the Pleiades. Not to mention the excitement of the prospect of engaging in a long-term exploratory mission of this nature. First of all, let me assure you all that the Pleiades is not going anywhere and that we are still scheduled to be the first Starfleet vessel to venture deep into that corner of space. It’s just that something else has come up that we will need to deal with first as a matter of urgency.”

Katanga nodded impatiently. “A medical emergency. Naturally, that must take priority. But I have to seriously question the sanity of whoever decided to keep the details of such a crucial assignment under wraps. The sooner I get the full scope of the situation on the ground, the quicker I can prepare for whatever we are dealing with.”

Star shot the African doctor a sharp look to communicate her annoyance with his choice of words, but Katanga chose to ignore this entirely. And while Michael was not always pleased with his chief medical officer’s bluntness, he could certainly sympathize with his point. Because of the complexities of the situation they had been thrust into, he had not been able to give Katanga more than a very basic heads-up on what their upcoming mission entailed, clearly much to the physician’s chagrin.

He acknowledged his outburst with a tilt of his head before addressing the entire group. “I understand your frustration, Doctor, and I appreciate all your patience in this matter over the last few days.”

But Star was not satisfied with glossing over Katanga's inappropriate behavior. “But at the end of the day, we are Starfleet officers expected to follow orders. We may not always get explanations, and we may not always like the ones we do get, but that doesn't change the fact that we will follow those orders to the best of our abilities regardless. I want you all to keep this in mind over the next few days.”

Of course, he didn’t disagree with anything his first officer had said, but considering the awkward position he now found himself in – he and Star both, really – perhaps he may not have chosen such strong language with the rest of the crew.

And Katanga, predictably, didn't respond well to it. "Orders are all well and good," he said, gracing Star with only a very brief glance before focusing back on the captain. "But if lives hang in the balance, my priorities are clear. And always will be."

Michael picked up before Star could respond. Usually, he depended on the Trill to be the buffer between Katanga's brusque and sometimes downright cantankerous ways and his own more diplomatic and subtle command style. Today he felt that if he let Star continue to run interference, she would actually make matters worse. "Nobody is suggesting that we prioritize one over the other, Doctor," he said and saw that it helped calm him down somewhat, even if he continued to disregard Star's poisonous glare directed his way.

"What's the mission, sir? Can you share any more details?"

He nodded at Nora, hiding his surprise that it was his fiery security chief who was attempting to cool down the meeting and bring it back on track. "Yes. The Federation has been approached by the Krellonian government and has formally requested medical assistance following the outbreak of what appears to be an unidentified viral disease on their colony world of Piquis VII."

"What do we know about this disease?" Katanga asked immediately.

"Next to nothing, so far. The Krellonians have not shared any details about the nature of this epidemic. All we know is that their own medical community is puzzled by the situation and currently has no answers to combat whatever this is."

"It must be pretty serious if they have come to us," said Leva. "I don't believe the Krellonians have ever asked the Federation for assistance with anything."

"Certainly not within recent memory, no," said Star.

"Have we tried to reach out to their leaders or their medical community?" said Katanga who was clearly already thinking about the best ways to handle the relief efforts. Hardly a surprise considering that he had co-founded Starfleet Medical's interstellar relief agency a few decades earlier and had led that program for years before joining *Eagle*. The other co-founder had been Tazla Star's former host.

Michael shook his head. "We haven't even been given a point of contact as of yet. We're hoping to receive a full situation brief once we arrive at Piquis."

Katanga nodded slowly. "That's far from ideal but not at all unusual. Especially for a xenophobic government that is unaccustomed to working with other members of the interstellar community. I wouldn't be surprised if we see quite a bit of resistance to our presence once we get there. I've seen that kind of thing before. Even if the central government may have agreed to seek outside assistance, it is more than likely that the local population and maybe even local leaders will object to our presence. Sometimes fiercely so."

"Your expertise in these matters will no doubt be invaluable, Doctor," Michael said with a little smile.

"The key will be to insist as much as possible to be allowed to help and to frame every argument with an emphasis on the wellbeing of their own populace," he said.

Michael wasn't quite sure if he liked all of that but for now, decided to bow to Katanga's admittedly vast experience in that field. "The situation will also offer us an opportunity to attempt improving our relations with the Krellonian people and officials," he said and then quickly raised a hand to try and cut off Katanga before he could protest. "Not, of course, at the cost of trying to provide whatever help they require," he said quickly. "But as I probably won't have to remind anyone in the room, the Dominion War has left us in a severely weakened state that will take years, if not decades to fully recover from. Since the Krellonian Star Alliance remained entirely neutral in that conflict, it would certainly not hurt if this mission could lead to the first step of an eventual alliance." He considered Lif Culsten closely while he spoke, having taken painful note that he had yet to speak at all on the subject, and still remained entirely disengaged, avoiding eye contact with anyone else in the room. "Lif, since we're talking about your people, perhaps you could share some insights into the matter."

The young helmsman turned to look at the captain but didn't speak right away. "I wish I could, sir. To be honest, I haven't been in touch with my people much ever since I left for the Academy. I'm probably not the best source of information on what is happening within the Star Alliance."

“And yet you probably know much more than anyone else here. Even Starfleet Intelligence has only very scant details about the Krellonian people,” said Star.

The silver-haired, earless lieutenant glanced at Katanga briefly. “The Doctor is right, my people tend to be xenophobic. I’m very surprised that they’ve even reached out to the Federation at all. I would not expect any kind of appetite from leaders for anything more than very specific and targeted assistance. It might even be nothing more than sharing of information.”

Michael and Star exchanged a concerned look, both, of course, thinking about the wider implications of what Culsten's theory would mean.

“Lou, didn’t you and Lif only just go visit Krellon a few weeks ago?” said Nora Laas. “What was your impression?”

The chief engineer seemed noticeably uncomfortable answering that question and looked at Culsten for support. When he didn’t offer any, she spoke up. “It was quite an experience. Overall, I thought they were a very friendly people. There were some exceptions, of course, but that’s always the case. We did have a few – well, troubles, while we were there.”

“What kind of troubles?” Star asked, beating Michael to asking the same questions by just a heartbeat.

Hopkins sought out Culsten once more and this time he did pick up the ball. “This is a turbulent time for my people. There has been a growing dissatisfaction among the populace with how the government conducts certain internal affairs.”

“How is this dissatisfaction manifesting itself?” asked Nora Laas, now fully in security officer mode again.

Culsten took a moment to answer the question. “When we were on the homeworld there were growing signs of civil unrest.”

“We got caught up in a rather violent riot just as we were about to leave,” said Hopkins when Culsten didn’t elaborate further. “For a short while there, I wasn’t sure if we were even going to get out of there in one piece.”

Star looked at both his officers with concern since this was clearly the first time she had heard about any of this. There wasn't a regulation for Starfleet officers to share what happened to them while they were on shore leave, but as a former intelligence operative,

Michael could see how she would have liked to have been briefed about these kinds of developments. As, no doubt, would have Starfleet. Michael had a suspicion that there was more to the story his two young officers had shared, especially considering Culsten's obvious reluctance to speak on the subject.

"Why us?"

Michael looked over at Deen who had been uncharacteristically quiet so far.

"We were practically at the other end of the galaxy when this request must have come in," she continued. "We were just days from a mission to take us even further away from Krellon space and we had to make use of the warp sled just to get us all the way out here in the first place. I can't help but wonder if all of this is because of Lif."

Culsten looked up and Michael could tell that he had been asking himself that very same question. "That's our best guess," Michael said and turned his eyes on the helmsman who now found himself at the center of attention.

Star prompted him when nobody else would. "Lieutenant. Do you know somebody within the Krellonian government who may have been responsible for requesting us specifically?"

"I am not sure."

Hopkins clearly had an opinion and almost sounded somewhat exasperated when Culsten refused to speak further on this point. "Lif, half your family works for the government. It could be your grandparents or that aunt of yours we met."

"I suppose that is possible."

An awkward silence fell over the room.

Michael tugged on his uniform jacket, trying to hide his frustration over his officer's lack of cooperation. "We'll be reaching Krellon space within five hours and Piquis shortly after that," he said and glanced at Katanga. "Doctor, I expect you will make whatever preparations you can given the lack of details we have at hand. I suggest you brush up on your Krellonian physiology."

He nodded sharply "Of course," he said and then to Culsten. "Lieutenant, I will need you to report to sickbay as soon as possible. As unappealing as it may sound to you, I will require your assistance as a living specimen."

It wasn't hard to tell from his facial expression that it sounded extremely unappealing to him indeed. But he nodded nevertheless. "Of course, Doctor."

"Very well," Michael said. "That's all for now. Dismissed."

Everyone in the room save for him and Star left their chairs and streamed towards the two exits until the captain and the first officer were left alone in the observation lounge.

He looked at the Trill. "This won't be easy, will it?"

Her scowling facial expression was answer enough.

## 2

"We're now approaching the outer border of Krellon space," said DeMara Deen from her station at operations before turning around and glancing at Michael in the captain's chair as well as Tazla Star by his side.

"Alright, we better do this by the book," he said and considered his first officer. "Remind us again of the protocol for crossing the border."

She brought up the requested details on her computer console. "According to what we've been told by Starfleet Command, we are required to drop out of warp immediately before reaching the outer boundary and continue to proceed at impulse while sending a general hail requesting permission to enter Krellonian space. We should then be intercepted by a border patrol vessel that may decide to board and inspect us before allowing us to proceed further. Under no circumstance are we to proceed into the inner boundary until we have been given permission by a designated border patrol agent."

"And that's after we've been formally invited," said Leva from the tactical station behind the two command officers. "They make it easier to enter Romulan territory."

Michael was fully aware that Leva spoke from experience since the half-Romulan had in fact been invited to visit the Romulan homeworld during the Dominion War.

"That tells us how much Krellonians like visitors," said Deen and then quickly shot a contrite look to her right and towards the helmsman. "No offense, Lif."

He shrugged his shoulders. "None taken. And you're right, they don't. One of the countless reasons I don't live there anymore."

"Let's not give them any reason to keep us out," said Michael. "Drop us out of warp and continue on impulse for the time being. Also, keep an eye on that inner boundary and make sure we keep well clear of it for now."

"Dropping out of warp," said Culsten, and not a moment later the viewscreen provided ample evidence that they were no longer traveling at faster than light speeds.

"Mister Leva," said Michael, turning to his tactical officer next. "Send a general greeting and request for permission to proceed into Krellon space on a wide-beam subspace channel."

"Broadcasting now."

"We are crossing the outer boundary to Krellon space," said Deen.

For a moment nobody on the bridge spoke almost as if everyone was holding their collective breaths, waiting for something to happen that would make it inevitably clear that they had now passed into another sovereign territory. It wasn't all that surprising, however, when that signal never came, after all, in outer space, territorial boundaries could not be enforced in the same manner as physical borders on a planet, the ever-shifting nature of space-time itself making it a near impossible prospect.

"So far, so good," said Star. "Lif, what can we expect from the border patrol?"

"Considering *Eagle's* size we've probably been on their long-range sensors for a while now. I would expect to see one or two ships on an intercept course long before we reach the inner boundary. If they follow standard procedure, they'll want to board us and ask a few questions. The whole thing shouldn't last more than ten minutes but it does tend to be a rather tense affair."

"Let's receive any guests in the observation room and I suggest we serve some food and drinks as well. Let's try to make this as comfortable for them as we can," said Michael, looking at Star.

She nodded quickly and stood. "I'll arrange it now."

“Sir, I have one ship on long-range sensors approaching us at high warp,” said Leva. “Belay that, it’s two ships ... no,” he stopped himself and looked up at the captain who regarded him with a curious look. “Make that eight frigates. They’ll be intercepting us in about twenty minutes. And we are being advised to hold our present position.”

Michael didn’t manage to hide his surprise. “Looks like they’re really rolling out the welcome committee for us.”

Star smirked. “I better make sure there are enough refreshments set up,” she said and headed out to make the arrangements.

“Lif,” said Michael. “Bring us to a full stop.”

“Full stop, aye, sir.”

“And would you mind joining us in the observation lounge?”

“Yes, sir,” he said after a brief delay. Michael hardly missed the little sigh he had tried to suppress unsuccessfully.

\* \* \*

It didn’t take long for *Eagle* to be entirely surrounded by the eight, much smaller border patrol vessels and Michael carefully studied the ships he could make out through the large windows of the observation lounge, holding position just a few hundred meters astern.

He was once again reminded how rarely Krellonians traveled outside their territory by the almost entirely alien design of the ships, one he had never come across before. He also couldn't deny that they possessed a somewhat interesting aesthetic appearance thanks to their gleaming, chrome-like hulls, their pronounced v-shape, and their wing-like nacelles, making them appear, at least to him, more like pieces of moving art, rather than a militaristic starship design.

He glanced over to Lif Culsten who stood nearby but the younger man was avoiding making direct eye contact or showing any interest in the ships outside for that matter. In fact, he seemed entirely lost in his own thoughts.

The doors to the room opened before Michael could address his helmsman’s lack of focus.

Tazla Star stepped in first, quickly followed by six tall Krellonians. Like with Culsten, their most distinctive physical feature that distinguished them from most other humanoid Michael had come across was the fact that they lacked any kind of auricles attached to their skulls and instead, where most other races had their primary auditory organs, there was nothing more than perfectly smooth skin. All six had uniformly narrow strips of silver hair running from their foreheads, all the way to the base of their necks. He guessed that the dark markings, possibly tattoos, on the side of their otherwise bald heads indicated some sort of rank. They wore heavy chrome-like combat armor and all six of them carried assault rifles. There were three men and two women on their team, even though Michael had to admit it wasn't easy to guess their genders due to their bulky uniforms, similar builds, and identical hairstyles.

A quick glance at Star and her slightly exasperated expression let him know that she had unsuccessfully attempted to get them to leave their weapons behind.

Nora Laas and two armed security officers had followed the Krellonian delegation into the room.

From a diplomatic standpoint, Michael would have preferred to do this without an armed escort but considering that they had clearly insisted on bringing their own guns, he appreciated Star's decision to include Nora and the security team.

He offered a traditional Krellonian greeting gesture he had been shown by Culsten, palms pressed together, thumbs crossed and clenched fingers pointing at their guests, and took a step forward. "Welcome aboard *Eagle*. I am Captain Michael Owens and on behalf of the United Federation of Planets, we are honored to be allowed to enter Krellonian space," he said with his best and most disarming smile before pointing at the table where a selection of refreshments and finger foods that were common within the Federation had been set up. "Perhaps you would like to sit down and sample some of what the Federation has to offer."

The officer standing at the front of the group, Michael guessed he was the leader since his scalp markings were more intricate than those of the others, looked over the table very briefly and then, entirely disinterested with what he had seen, glanced back at him. "You are the commanding officer of this vessel?"

He nodded. "That is correct. Captain Michael Owens. I don't believe I got your name?"

The man reached for a padd he had strapped to his belt and began to enter commands. "State your full name, race, and rank?"

Michael shot Star a quick look but she just shrugged, not entirely sure what the purpose of the question was either. "Michael Timothy Owens. Human. Captain with Starfleet."

He continued to make notes without looking up. "State your place of birth?"

"The planet Earth in the Sol System."

"I need you to be more specific."

"A place called Waukesha on the North American continent," he said, beginning to feel slightly exasperated. "Perhaps we could discuss arrangements for traveling to the Piquis system. I understand we have been urgently requested by your government to render aid to its population."

"This vessel, *Eagle*, you called it?"

He nodded. "That is correct."

"What is the exact number of its crew and passengers?"

He had to think about that for a brief moment. *Eagle's* ordinary complement was seven hundred and eighty, made up of officers, enlisted crewmen, and civilians. But it had been a long time since his ship had been home to that many people. The figure had changed most drastically during the war when all the civilians had disembarked and they had been replaced with a military contingent made out of combat-trained marines. The crew had been decimated over the war years due to casualties and reassignments alike to such a degree that the total complement had often varied from one week to the next. Following the war, reassignments had continued to replenish other ships and bases that had been harder hit by the war than *Eagle*. Then, just a few weeks ago, following a little bit of soul-searching, Michael had decided to allow civilians to once again return to the ship by parting ways with marines who had been on board for nearly two years.

"Currently, I believe it's six hundred forty-nine souls," he said after a moment and sought confirmation from his first officer who nodded in the affirmative. "I hope you don't need me to go through

all their names. Otherwise, we'll be here a while," he added with a smile.

The border security officer clearly had no sense of humor about this at all, nor did his colleagues, who all remained entirely stone-faced.

Star's look seemed to say it all: *Tough crowd.*

"We will require a breakdown of your crew by race and rank and place of origin. You will also provide a full manifest of all and any cargo your vessel is currently transporting."

"I believe that can be arranged," said Star.

Michael nodded. "We're more than happy to fully cooperate with all your requirements," he said. "However, we would appreciate it if we could expedite this process slightly to address the medical emergency on Piquis VII as soon as possible."

But once again the officer seemed entirely apathetic to the reason *Eagle* had come into Krellonian space. "How many habitable decks does this vessel comprise of?"

"*Eagle* has thirty decks within the saucer and engineering hulls and another six in the pod," he said.

"We will commence a deck-to-deck inspection of your vessel. Your crew is instructed to cease all activity during the search, disarm themselves where necessary, and submit themselves to a security scan. Any interference with the inspection will not be tolerated."

Michael frowned, not liking the sound of this at all. Putting aside that he had not been advised to expect such a thorough inspection of his ship and crew, the intrusiveness of what the officer had suggested went far beyond what he would have allowed from an ally, not to mention a people he knew basically nothing about. "How long do you expect this to take?"

The irritation in the officer's face was palpable. This was not a man accustomed to being questioned. "Considering the size of your vessel and crew, we will have to prepare six additional inspection teams. If your crew cooperates fully, I expect to complete the inspection within eight standard hours."

"I appreciate that you have your regulations," Michael said, trying to sound as diplomatic as he knew how. "But surely we can make some sort of exception in this case. After all your own government has invited us here to address an urgent medical

situation. Any delays in getting to Piquis VII will likely also put more Krellonian lives at risk. Besides, I have regulations of my own, I cannot allow your teams to inspect sensitive areas of this vessel.”

The annoyed expression on the other man’s face made it clear that this was not something he was accustomed to hearing.

Star took a small step forward. “Perhaps we could reach a compromise. We are still a few hours out from the Piquis system. How about we continue to our destination, with you escorting us of course, and we will let you carry out a joint inspection of *Eagle* while we are en route?”

Michael thought that to be a sensible compromise and gave the Trill a quick nod to let her know that he fully supported this alternative and appreciated her attempt to try and move this along.

The border officer, however, was clearly not interested in finding a middle ground on anything and quickly shook his head. “Not acceptable. You will follow our instructions,” he said, his tone becoming a lot more agitated all of a sudden, and Michael could tell that the rest of his team was beginning to tense up as well. It was clear that Krellonian border patrol agents were not in the habit of discussing their procedures or being questioned about them. As far as they were concerned, there was only one way of doing things.

Michael turned to Culsten who had been suspiciously quiet once again, not really offering any assistance in dealing with this situation.

“Justicar,” Culsten said, apparently recognizing the man’s rank insignia. “As you can tell, I am a Krellonian. The name is Liftu-Tensu-Leetu. I can vouch for these people and the urgency of our request to be allowed swift passage to the Piquis system.”

The justicar considered his fellow Krellonian almost contemptuously. “It does not matter who or what you are,” he said. “You, your commanding officer and the rest of this crew will comply with our instructions.”

“Or what?” Star said, clearly having lost her patience with this entire affair. She continued before Michael could stop her. “We are trying to be reasonable and cooperate with your directives but may I remind you that we are here at your people’s request? Are you implying that if we don’t comply, you will not let us enter your space to help your own people?”

“I am implying nothing,” the justicar growled, his irritation now having reached blatant anger. “You are already within Krellonian Star Alliance territory. By law, you are obligated to follow any instructions given to you by an official agent of the Star Alliance. You must comply or you and your vessel will be seized,” he said and raised his heavy rifle, trying to point it at Star.

But Star’s reflexes were slightly faster and she grabbed the rifle by its extended barrel and before he could bring it up far enough to line up a shot. Michael could see them both exerting great effort, the justicar trying to raise his weapon while Star tried to keep him from doing it.

“Remove your hand at once. You are interfering with Star Alliance operations.”

“You’re trying to point a weapon at me.”

Things were beginning to spiral out of control. Michael realized he had to act quickly to avoid a potential shootout in the packed observation lounge. “Let’s all calm down and –”

Star countered his increased effort to raise his rifle by grabbing hold of it with her other hand.

The weapon erupted loudly with a bright flash and a bolt of crimson energy burned a large hole into the carpeted floor.

The other five officers quickly raised their own weapons, for all appearances ready to fire.

Nora sprang to action and ripped a rifle out of one Krellonian's hand before he could point it at anybody and used the butt of the same weapon to strike him hard enough against the side of his head that he lost his balance and dropped to the floor.

Michael took a quick step toward the third man trying to get a beat on him and drove his own rifle into his midsection which caused the agent to double over in pain before he lost his grip on his weapon.

Star had let go of the rifle she had tried to keep out of her face when it had fired suddenly, most likely because of the heat generated through the barrel and now found herself at the wrong end of that exchange with the muzzle pointed right at her neck

Nora’s security guards had followed their leader’s example and the petite human Skylar McIntyre had shoved her phaser emitter right into the face of a female officer who was now pointing her rifle

at the captain. T'Nerr, the orange-furred Caitian had his weapon trained on another border officer who was threatening Nora with her rifle.

Michael raised the weapon he had commandeered and pointed it at the justicar who seemed moments away from blowing off Star's head. In truth, he had no idea if he would be able to figure out how to operate the rifle, or if it had a stun setting for that matter, before the justicar could pull the trigger.

"Lower your weapons," said Michael forcefully. "It doesn't have to be like this."

"You provoked this confrontation," the justicar hissed, holding firm to his weapon, the muzzle of which nearly brushed against Star's vulnerable throat. "You will lower your weapons and surrender to our authority."

"Look around, I don't think you are in much of a position of authority at present," said Nora who kept her own liberated, alien rifle as steady as a rock, inches away from one of the agent's heads.

Michael shot her a sharp look, making it clear that she wasn't helping.

"The way I see things, this can all end peacefully if we just agree to lower our weapons and write this whole unfortunate affair off as nothing more than a cultural misunderstanding. The alternative is that whoever is left standing after we start shooting will have to start picking up body pieces off the floor and explain to our respective governments how a humanitarian mission turned into a bloodbath," said Michael, trying to keep his eyes on everyone in the room, most of whom had either weapons pointed at them or were pointing them at somebody else. Or both.

Nobody spoke for a moment as an unsettling silence fell over the room during which Michael was sure he could hear not just his but several heartbeats, most of which were racing far faster than would have been normal. He was also fully cognizant that just one slipped finger could lead to a bloody massacre right here on board his own ship.

"This isn't over," said the justicar. But instead of lowering his weapon, he used one of his hands to tap the back of his gun-wielding hand twice.

Michael braced himself for what that might mean.

It turned out to be some sort of retrieval signal as not a moment later the justicar and all of his people were engulfed in a bright yellowish energy beam before they disappeared entirely.

Michael uttered a heavy breath as he lowered his weapon.

"Well, that escalated quickly," said Star.

Nora looked more contrite as she handed the alien rifle to T'Nerr. "Sorry sir, I think I may have made matters worse but it looked like people were going to start shooting."

"You did what you had to, Laas," he said and looked up at the ceiling. "Owens to bridge. What is the status of the Krellonian ships?"

Xylion responded promptly. *"We have detected transporter activity and all vessels have powered their engines and are altering their formation as we speak."*

"Red alert, shields up," said Michael and then swiftly turned towards the doors, Star, Culsten, and Nora close behind him. It took them just a few moments to get back to the bridge one deck above.

Xylion was already freeing up the command chair as Michael and the rest emerged from the turbolift. "The Krellonian vessels have raised shields and activated their weapons."

"Hail them," said Michael as he headed straight for his chair.

Leva shook his head. "They are ignoring us," he said and then looked at Nora, clearly not having missed the concerned expression on all their faces. "What happened?"

"Things didn't go well," she said.

"To say the least," added Michael. "What are they doing?"

Deen took that one. "Nothing for now. They have moved to what looks like an aggressive formation. Their weapons are definitely fully powered as are their shields."

"This is ridiculous. Just open a channel," said Michael.

Leva confirmed. "Channel open."

Michael tugged at his jacket. "Justicar, let's not escalate this any further than it already has. If you start firing we will be forced to defend ourselves. This will not end well for any of us. If this is what it takes, we are willing to withdraw from your space until this—misunderstanding has been resolved."

There was no response.

Culsten had since taken the helm again. "They are not giving us many ways to escape, we are still mostly surrounded. The most direct course out of Krellon space is blocked off."

"They don't want us to stay and they don't want us to go," mused Star. "Make up your minds."

"We cannot afford to get into a conflict here. Our mission hasn't even started yet," said Michael.

Star nodded. "Agreed. But that appears to be up to our friends out there at the moment. And I think more than anything else, we may have offended their sense of pride by not following their orders without question."

"Sir, I'm detecting a high-frequency subspace message," said Leva.

Michael turned to look at his tactical officer. "For us?"

He shook his head. "It appears to be directed at the border vessels."

"This could be very good or very bad for us," said Star quietly.

"I think it's the former," said Deen with a small smile growing on her lips. "The ships are powering down weapons and are moving away. Whatever message they just received apparently advised them to back off."

"Agreed," said Leva. "Receiving a message from the lead vessel now. Text only. We are instructed to proceed to the Piquis system at best speed. We are not to diverge from our course for any reason or suffer the consequence."

Star looked at her captain. "That it? No apology? No 'sorry about nearly decorating the inside of your ship with your brains'?"

"I believe you were right the first time, Commander. This is about pride now. Considering the alternative, I think I'll take it. Mister Culsten, if you would kindly get us out of here and take us where we need to go. The quicker the better."

"Laying in a course and engaging at warp eight," the Krellonian helmsman confirmed.

"I read three of the vessels following us at a distance," said Leva.

Michael nodded in acknowledgment and then let out a breath of air he hadn't realized he had kept in. "Keep an eye on them, Commander," he said and shot an exasperated look at his first officer.

“If dealing with other Krellonian officials is going to be even half as challenging as this encounter was, I believe we’re going to be in one hell of a mess here.”

She nodded in full agreement. “This mission hasn’t even begun yet and I’m already dreading writing up that report. That’s got to be a new record.”

### 3

She realized something was up the moment she had stepped out of the turbolift and onto deck thirteen, very nearly colliding with two crewmen transporting a couple of rather bulky containers on an obviously undersized anti-grav sled.

A potential cargo spill all over the floor was avoided at the last moment by Tazla’s quick reflexes and helping the two surprised crewmen by grabbing hold of the bulkier of the two crates before it could slip off the sled.

After giving a brief reminder of standard cargo transport procedures, Tazla continued towards her destination all the while noticing the much heavier than usual foot traffic, most of which seemingly concerned with moving equipment from one place to another.

This seemed odd to her.

As the ship’s first officer she prided herself in knowing exactly what was happening at any given time on *Eagle*, certainly any undertakings requiring this much personnel and hardware, and yet she was not aware of the exact purpose of what she had encountered. More importantly, she had certainly not signed off on any of it.

It didn’t seem to be limited to one specific department either. Among the busy crewmembers she encountered on her way down the corridor, she could spot medical and science personnel as well as engineers and quite a few faces belonging to people she knew worked in Nora’s security team.

She reached cargo bay two and found the heavy doors leading inside already wide open to accommodate the constant traffic of people coming and going, very few of whom were empty-handed.

Cargo bay two was *Eagle's* single largest storage space, with perhaps the only exception being the main shuttle bay and the hangar deck directly below it, and remembering the last cargo manifest coming across her desk, she knew that it currently contained a wide range of equipment and other payloads that starships like *Eagle* often carried to assist the crew in their varied mission objectives.

However, it now appeared as if the entire bay had been completely reorganized with much of the regular cargo having been removed in favor of what seemed to be crates upon crates of medical supplies and instruments many of which already unpacked from their storage containers.

Everything seemed very orderly arranged within designated areas inside the bay, from essential medication and drugs in one corner, to spare tricorders and other tools in another, stretchers, blankets, and bandages, all the way to large and bulky items like biobeds, pre-fab parts for a field hospital and even a couple of industrial replicators for medical use.

A plethora of personnel, primarily blue-collared medical specialists and science officers were moving back and forth across the bay with noticeable purpose, working on adding to, sorting, and organizing the equipment.

Tazla had seen all this before. In fact, in an earlier life, she had helped to write the book on this exact type of medical preparedness procedure.

She quickly found the brain behind this particular operation when she spotted Elijah Katanga speaking with Xylion near the center of the cargo bay, efficiently giving the Vulcan instructions. She made a beeline for the two men.

"I want to set up a forward containment area in shuttle bay two with a capacity for at least fifty patients as soon as possible. Liaise with Doctor Nelson regarding containment procedures required to ensure a level four facility. That means both force fields and physical containment sections. Let's also be ready to have a contingency isolation ward in the main shuttle bay. It's better to have it and not need it than not having it once we get overwhelmed with patients."

The Vulcan was studiously making notes on his padd as he was listening to the veteran physician's instructions.

"Gentlemen? Somebody like to clue me in to what we're doing here?" she said as she stepped up to the two senior officers.

Xylion stopped working on the padd and looked up at her with what could only be considered a puzzled expression. He raised an eyebrow with apparent surprise before he glanced over at his colleague. "Doctor, I was under the impression that you had obtained approval for this course of action before commencing it."

But Katanga ignored the Vulcan, focusing on Tazla instead. "I would think of all people you would recognize this. Or did that also get lost when your symbiont moved hosts?"

She frowned and swallowed the urge to bite back with a sarcastic reply. She had a good idea of what he thought may have been lost in the transition from Dezwin Star to Tazla. He was, of course, wrong on both accounts. She took a moment to let her eyes wander across the bay. "Looks like a standard MAAP preparatory operation. Category three?"

"Four," he corrected her.

She nodded. "Which is interesting since I do not recall seeing a request coming my way to approve any of this."

"I am the chief medical officer on this ship. It is within my authority to initiate medical operations as I see fit."

"Maybe," she countered. "But not on this scale. And certainly not involving other ship departments. Looks to me you've involved half the crew in this exercise without so much as giving me a heads-up."

"That's why I asked you to come down here now," he said, doing little to hide his annoyance with the way this conversation was going. "So you may rest assured that we know what we're doing and authorize additional resources."

"Commander," she said to Xylion. "Could you give us a moment, please?"

He dipped his head slightly and then stepped away, appearing almost grateful to be excused.

"What are you doing, Eli?"

"Exactly what I said. What you can see with your own two eyes," he said and then, apparently tiring of the conversation, moved on to inspect a row of medical tricorders and giving instructions to the crewmembers preparing the equipment.

Tazla followed him closely. "We still have no idea what it is we're dealing with. We have been given no indication whatsoever of the nature of the epidemic or what kind of assistance the Krellonians even want from us. All that hardly justifies mobilizing on this scale."

He stopped and turned to look at her. "We have been in orbit around this planet for over twelve hours now. What do you expect me to do in that time? Twiddle my thumbs and carry out theoretical analyses? We need to prepare for whatever we may find down there. This is how we prepare, in case you had forgotten."

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "I have forgotten nothing."

"Could have fooled me," he said and moved on to look over the emergency medkits that had been neatly arranged in rows on several temporary tables.

She uttered an exasperated sigh. "Alright, fine, you do your preparations and anything else you need to do, I'll sign off on whatever other resources you need. But this thing between us has to stop. You want to be mad at me, be mad at me, but that doesn't give you the right to do an end-around and pretend I am not your commanding officer. This isn't MAAP and you're not the director anymore. Something like this needs to be approved through the proper channels."

With his back turned towards her, he kept his attention on inspecting the medkits.

"Eli?"

"Yes, I heard you, Commander. You're in charge and I didn't follow the rules. Consider me chastised," he mumbled without ever turning around.

She continued to stare daggers into his back to no apparent end. Then she turned around and made to leave.

"Commander?"

She stopped and turned around. "What else?"

"Twelve hours. That is not acceptable and you know it. Not when dealing with an epidemic," he said.

"We don't even know what it is."

He nodded. "Exactly my point. Enough time has already been lost for us to just sit up here and wait for things to happen. We need to take action."

She shook her head. "It's out of our hands. We may have been asked here but we're still just guests. If they don't want us to help, there is nothing we can do." She wasn't entirely able to hide her own frustration over the way things had gone so far. Bad enough that it had very nearly come to blows with the Krellonian agents at the border. After finally arriving at Piquis VII, they had been advised to hold position in orbit and given no further instructions or information. In the meantime, the planet was clearly under a strict quarantine that seemed to include a total communications blackout, since no further hails to the surface had been answered.

"This is Merian V all over again," he said. "You remember Merian V?"

"The Levodian flu outbreak, of course, I remember."

"And the regional government was adamant that we did not get involved, believing that all they needed to fight the disease was faith in their gods. They were adamant that allowing us 'heretics' to set foot in their province would only make matters worse. Thousands of people lost their lives that we could've saved if we had been allowed access to the most affected areas sooner."

She recalled that incident quite vividly, it had been one of the first true tests of the newly created Medical Assistance and Advisory Program Eli and Dezwin had helped create. Back when they had both still worked as frontline doctors, right there in the middle of any hotspot planet that had requested Starfleet Medical's help with a crisis. She also recalled his impressive persistence that had eventually worn down any objections from those government representatives who had fought tooth and nail against Starfleet involvement.

"This is a much more delicate situation than Merian V, Eli. We cannot afford to apply this kind of pressure here."

"See? That right there is the politician speaking. This new Star I hardly recognize. The one who thinks more about keeping her superiors content than caring about the suffering of people in need. I've never been that person. And I don't want to be. My job is to save lives and I will do whatever it takes to make sure I get my job done."

She glared at him, not appreciating his tone, or in fact, any of the words he had chosen.

"If you are not willing to do it, rest assured, I will. I'll take this up with the captain and I'll go right to those leaders on the planet."

You know I will. And if that doesn't help, I'll track down whoever invited us here and harass the Krellonian head of state until they either kick us out or let us help."

The staring contest between them lasted what seemed like minutes but thankfully it was cut short after just a few seconds by an incoming hail from the bridge. "*Owens to Star.*"

It took her another moment to answer while she kept her green eyes laser-focused on those of the man she had once called her closest friend. Then she broke contact to take the call. "Star here. Go ahead, sir."

*"I think we might be finally getting somewhere. We've just received word that a government official is due to arrive in the system and willing to meet with us. He should be here within the hour."*

"Excellent news, sir."

*"Let's hope so. I suggest you find Doctor Katanga and asked him to join us once he gets here."*

Her eyes found Elijah's again who had overheard her conversation. "I'm sure he will be delighted to hear that."

*"Owens out."*

Without uttering another word, Tazla Star turned on her heel and left the cargo bay.

## 4

After their very nearly disastrous run-in with the Krellonian border patrol, Michael was more than a little wary about their meeting with the government official once his ship had arrived in the Piquis system some fourteen hours after *Eagle's* arrival to the seventh planet.

The concern as it turned out had been unfounded since Councilman Yorlo was nothing like the belligerent Krellonians they had encountered at the border. Physically he was not nearly as impressive, where the border agents had been tall and muscular, Yorlo was short and squat, perhaps even a bit bulky not unlike many other government officials and politicians Michael had met over the years and who spent the majority of their time behind a desk. He

wore his long, silvery hair in a similar style as Lif Culsten, tied together at the back of his head.

For his relatively small size, he seemed to have quite a bit of energy, or perhaps it was anxiety since he had refused the chair Michael had offered him in the observation lounge and instead remained on his feet and kept pacing back and forth between the tall windows that offered an orbital view of Piquis VII.

Michael, along with Star and Katanga followed the seemingly agitated councilman with their eyes from their chairs. Michael had decided against inviting Culsten to this meeting since the helmsman had not been able to offer much assistance in their last meeting with his kinsmen.

“After hearing your version of events, the reports I have read from our border patrol are beginning to make a disturbingly amount of sense. I simply cannot believe they acted so obtusely after I had given such specific instructions about your arrival. This is very disappointing and I guarantee that this will not be the end of this matter.”

“We’re just glad that your message reached them when it did,” said Michael, since having learned that it had been Yorlo who had managed to get the border patrol to stand down in the nick of time and before the entire situation could have turned into a bloody conflict.

“I don’t even want to think about what could have happened if it hadn’t. The political fallout alone, from a border skirmish with a Federation starship within our own territory, could have been catastrophic,” he said.

“Thankfully, it didn’t come to that,” said Star.

Michael nodded. “You can rest assured that we would have pursued any possible avenue to avoid open conflict.”

Yorlo stopped and glanced at the starship captain. “That is a very enlightened attitude, Captain, I commend you for it. I suppose it is true what they say about the Federation. Or at least those few rumors you hear behind closed doors. The truth of the matter is, my government takes great pains to keep itself isolated, as you have no doubt seen with your own eyes. And information coming into the Star Alliance is strictly controlled. You will find that many of my fellow kinsmen believe in the inherent superiority of our people and

our institutions and do not prescribe to anything that could even remotely challenge those perceptions.”

“I take it that is the reason we have been sitting on our hands for the last fourteen hours instead of being allowed to help with the medical crisis unfolding planetside?” said Katanga, never one to mince words or afraid of cutting right to the heart of the matter. Once again he ignored the sharp look he received from Tazla Star for his brusqueness.

Yorlo too took a moment to consider the veteran doctor before he spoke. Then he began to nod slowly. “You can ascribe that to long-winded bureaucracy and good old-fashioned xenophobia as well, yes,” he said and then finally took a seat at the table. “I wish I could have arrived here sooner to deal with the situation but that simply wasn’t possible.”

“We fully understand, Councilman,” said Star, once again letting Katanga know, with a quick sidelong glance, that diplomatic tact was a virtue she expected from all the officers under her command, no matter if they were ensigns right out of the Academy or grumpy old veterans who were going on their seventh decade in Starfleet. “What matters now is that you are here and you can hopefully speed up the process going forward.”

“I’ll certainly do whatever I can.”

Michael took over. “Perhaps you could start by filling us in as to what has happened on Piquis and why you’ve asked for our assistance. We have not been given much information so far.”

“Of course,” he said but apparently was not able to remain in his chair as he quickly jumped back onto his feet, indicating towards the planet behind him. “The first thing you must understand is that there is significant resistance to your being here. Not just from some of my colleagues in the Central Council who believe that any contact with outsiders is tantamount to a betrayal of Kellonians’ core values, but also from Piquis VII. The local chief administrator, a woman called Chella, has strongly protested Federation assistance.”

“I take it she was overruled,” said Michael.

“By a slim majority,” Yorlo said, nodding slowly. “And only after it became obvious that our own medical community would not find an answer to this pandemic currently sweeping across the planet perhaps before it’s already too late.”

"Let's talk about this pandemic," said Katanga, still not entirely able to keep his tone as polite as perhaps Star would have liked.

The councilman reached for a case he had brought with him and he deposited on the chair next to his. He opened the slim case and retrieved a data padd not too different from those used within Starfleet. He activated a few commands and then handed it over to Katanga across the table. "This contains everything we have learned so far. Hopefully, you will be able to understand the medical jargon. It is, I'm afraid to say, not my field of expertise." He regarded Michael next. "What we do know is that we believe that this is an artificially created disease."

"You think this was done on purpose?" Michael said. "By whom?"

Yorlo uttered a sigh. "There are certain elements within our society who feel that they are treated unfairly and are known to resort to violence. This would mark the first time they have shown such a level of commitment and planning but the fact that only a specific segment of the population is affected supports our theory that a terrorist organization is behind this."

Katanga it seemed, had already stopped listening, instead, he was entirely focused on the content of the padd Yorlo had passed to him, intently studying its contents, his frown only deepening the more he read.

"Doctor, what can you tell from that data?" Michael said after having taken note of the Katanga's intense study of the padd.

"Not nearly enough," he said and continued reading without so much as glancing up once, almost as if the people around him had suddenly ceased to be.

"Eli?" Star prompted gently but with a slight edge in her tone. "Anything you can share with us?"

He still refused to make eye contact. "I will need some time to study this."

"Initial impression then, if you please, Doctor," Michael said, trying hard not to let his impatience surface. He understood that in a medical crisis such as this, he couldn't have asked for a better medical professional, with more experience or knowledge in his field. He also understood that this level of competence oftentimes came

with eccentricity. He was willing to put up with it if it would get results. To a degree.

“At first blush, this looks like a retrovirus that attacks the host's immune system to a degree that it is unable to fight off any kind of infections or diseases and will eventually lead to the patient's death.”

Michael nodded. While he couldn't claim to be a medical expert, far from it, he possessed a basic understanding of how retroviruses worked and of medical conditions affecting the immune system. “Those kinds of conditions, don't they usually take years to fully develop? It sounds to me that this epidemic has already caused several fatalities in a very short time.”

“Yes,” Yorlo said quickly. “The latest reports from Piquis indicate that three hundred people have died from this illness in less than a week.”

Katanga put down the padd. “I will need more to go on than this. I need to see blood work and full body scans. I need tissue samples of healthy and infected patients. I need to know the exact stages of this condition. In short, I need to do a full medical examination on patients who have contracted this disease. We've already made all the required preparations and could start transferring patients within the hour.”

Yorlo looked skeptical.

“Councilman,” Katanga said sternly. “The longer we hesitate on this, the longer it will take before we get to the bottom of this pandemic and the more people will lose their lives, possibly needlessly. If there is even the slightest chance to stop this from spreading, we need to act now. Too much time has already been wasted.”

“Of course, I understand this,” he said. “But it will be nearly impossible for me to convince Chella to allow Krellonians to be transported to an off-world vessel. She simply won't agree to it and in those matters, even the Central Council will likely not be able to overrule her. Certainly not in the kind of time frames we need.”

“If we can't bring patients up here, maybe we can get Doctor Katanga to the patients,” said Star.

“As long as I can start examinations, I don't care if I have to do it in a broom closet.”

"A supervised visit to the surface may be something that could be arranged," Yorlo said. "I will attempt to make this happen as soon as I return to my ship." He glanced at Michael. "However, before that, I must ask a favor of you, Captain."

He gave him a short nod to proceed.

"I would very much like to speak to my nephew." Before Michael could ask, Yorlo continued. "I believe he serves as an officer on your ship."

\* \* \*

It hadn't been very long ago, just a few weeks, since Lif Culsten had last seen his uncle. It had been during a mostly awkward family gathering at his grandparents' residence on the Krellon homeworld, he and Louise had visited during their shore leave, much to his chagrin.

Now Yorlo had shown up at his doorstep and after a moment of surprise at finding him standing outside his quarters, escorted there by Tazla Star, Lif had invited him inside.

"So this is how Starfleet officers live?" he said as he inspected his quarters that despite his relative youth and low rank, were decently sized thanks to his position on the senior staff. "Quite impressive compared to the cramped conditions of an Alliance Navy ship. And yet quite a step down from what you were used to at home, no?"

Lif watched his uncle silently as he toured his quarters, paying close attention to most everything he could see, the standard, Starfleet-issue furniture, the decorations, including framed pictures of him and his friends from his Academy days, and even his choice of Earth-based houseplants. Yorlo, he noticed, still had that same high energy he'd displayed when Lif had been a child and when he and his aunt had visited him at his grandparents' home on regular occasions.

He stopped his brief survey and glanced back at the owner of the quarters. "If it were not for the photographs, it would be difficult to guess that the person who lives here is a Krellonian," he said and if

he tried to keep his tone free of judgment, he was not entirely successful. "No scrolls of the Infallible Creator's Blessing, no representations of the Yellow Rose, not a single piece of art from within the Alliance."

"I haven't had a chance to unpack," he said lamely.

Yorlo offered a grin, fully aware clearly of Lif's tendencies to attempt to distance himself from his own culture. Something that had been obvious even in his adolescent years and just before he had left for the Federation. "And how is your charming, young friend. Louise, was it? I took quite a liking to her."

"She's well."

"You don't live together?"

"She has her own quarters."

"Right," he said and acknowledged his disinterest in discussing his personal matters with him.

"Can I offer you something? A beverage perhaps?" he said, almost as an afterthought.

Yorlo shook his head. "Perhaps some other time. I have much to do after I leave here today."

"You want to tell me why you're here?"

"It's about your aunt."

His eyes grew a little wider. "Garla?"

"She's up to something and I don't know what it is. I need you to find out."

Lif couldn't believe his ears. "You have arranged for a Federation starship, half a galaxy away, to come all the way out here and into Alliance space, breaking who knows how many local taboos, just so you could get me to spy on your wife for you?"

"Of course not," Yorlo quickly shot back. "In case you hadn't heard, there is a pandemic on Piquis VII and hundreds of people are dead or dying. That is a fact. A planet-wide quarantine is in effect and Alliance doctors are not even close to finding a cure. All those things are true and whether the local administrators or my opponents in the Council like it or not, we will need Starfleet's help to try and defeat this disease."

Lif nodded slowly. "And how does Garla fit into all that?"

He uttered a heavy sigh and walked up to one of the windows but when he realized that it was impossible to see the planet from

this angle, he turned back to his nephew. "That is what I don't know and why I need you. She has been diverting resources to this backwater system for years now, and never more than in the last few months. Her status as a sentinel has allowed her to operate with almost complete autonomy and she has practically refused to answer any questions the Central Council has demanded regarding her operations."

"You mean your questions."

His expression hardened. "They are one and the same."

"I find it difficult to believe that you don't have your own resources in place to deal with this other than involving me and *Eagle*."

Yorlo waved him off. "Of course I do. There are a number of requests that have been formally submitted to the Eye for full disclosure of any operations taking place in this system. And while you may have forgotten much about our people, I trust you remember the agonizingly slow process of our bureaucracy. It will take weeks for those requests to be actioned. Perhaps months. When this latest crisis unfolded and I realized that we needed foreign assistance, I knew how to address both problems."

"Two birds."

The elder Krellonian gave his younger kinsmen a puzzled look, clearly not understanding the reference.

"I still don't understand what you expect me to do about this."

"Garla is on Piquis VII, that much I know. I will look into giving you and your doctor permission to visit the surface. In fact, getting authorization for you should be much easier. Once there, I want you to seek her out and talk to her. You know she still adores you, has done so ever since you were a child. When the two of us still lived together she spoke of you often and I also know that she spoke to you privately when you last saw her. No doubt to convince you to work with her."

"You want me to spy on my aunt? A Sentinel of the Eye, a spymaster," he said, sounding just as disbelieving as he felt. "She's going to see right through me the moment I step through her doors."

But he shook his head. "Garla might be very good at what she does but she has one important weakness. She is very sentimental and she cares about family. I know she'll open up to you. And

whatever it is that she is up to here, I'm convinced it is bad news for the Alliance. You haven't been here but trust me when I tell you that her political views have become increasingly extremist over the years. It is the reason we drifted apart as much as we did. I fear somebody will have to stop her."

He quickly shook his head. "That's not going to be me."

"Maybe not. But you can help find out what it is she is doing and how she plans to do it. I am not asking for me, Liftu. I'm asking for your mother and father. For your younger brother and everyone else whose lives will be affected, perhaps even destroyed by what she's up to. You may have turned your back on your people, but can you really live with turning them down in the hour of their greatest need? Can you live with knowing that you could have stopped it all before it even started, if only you had taken action? I implore you, Liftu, to help your people and your family to survive this latest crisis before it is too late."

\* \* \*

"You turned him down?" Tazla Star said with palpable surprise evident in her voice as she considered the Krellonian sitting in one of the two guest chairs facing Captain Owens' desk in his ready room. Still standing by the wall, she shot a baffled look at the captain sitting in his chair.

"May I ask why?" said Michael who shared his first officer's surprise after Culsten had briefed them both on his meeting with his uncle that had concluded just minutes earlier in his quarters.

The helmsman considered the question for a moment, or much more likely, his answer. "It's just not something I feel very comfortable about, sir. You have to understand, Garla and I, we were very close when I was growing up. For a time, while my mother had fallen ill, she was practically my ersatz parent. I don't like the idea of spying on her for Yorlo."

"What if he's right and whatever it is she's doing could pose a serious danger to the Krellonian people?" asked Star.

“I find that hard to believe,” he said and shook his head. “Garla has always been a patriot first and foremost and a traditionalist second. I don’t doubt that she is up to something, that much was obvious when she last spoke to me on the homeworld but I cannot believe she intends to harm the Star Alliance or her own people.”

“That’s when she tried to recruit you?” said Michael who recalled that he had mentioned this previously.

“It wasn’t what you would call a hard sell,” he quickly clarified. “She felt she was doing important work. She seemed passionate about it and believed that I could be a true asset to her in achieving her goals. But she didn’t offer many details and it would have involved me leaving *Eagle* and Starfleet. Coming back to Krellon. That’s not something I’m prepared to do.”

Michael simply stared at him for a moment as he experienced a rather painful déjà vu. After all, what the young Krellonian had described was almost the exact same situation he had found himself in just a few weeks earlier when his father had made his case to him – entirely unexpectedly – to leave *Eagle* behind and join him to work on a project that he had believed to be of the uttermost importance to the Federation. And just like Garla had apparently done when trying to convince his nephew, his father had refused to share the true nature of that project. And just like Culsten, Michael had turned him down.

Star, apparently sensing that Michael was drawing parallels to his own experiences, continued. “I think you should reconsider, Lieutenant. Whatever it is that your aunt is working on, it clearly has your uncle greatly worried. If there is a chance that this could develop into some sort of threat to Krellon or even beyond, it would be better to know about it early instead of risking having to face a possible crisis unprepared.”

Culsten added a heavy sigh. “To be entirely honest with you, Commander, I have my reasons to doubt Yorlo’s motivations in this matter.”

“How so?” asked Michael.

Culsten made eye contact with the captain. “Garla and Yorlo have been separated for quite some time and there is a lot of personal animosity between the two of them. Animosity that goes beyond differences in philosophies and political convictions.”

"You think it's personal?"

Culsten nodded. "I'm convinced that it is."

Michael had heard enough for now. "Very well, Lif. Thanks for coming up here and telling us about this." He said this even though it had been Star who had to prompt Culsten to give them both a recap of his conversation with his uncle.

"Of course," he said and stood. "Sir," he said respectfully and gave Star a brief nod as well before he left the ready room.

Star turned to the captain as soon as the doors had closed behind the helmsman. "So that was interesting."

Michael leaned back in his chair. "The timing of all this is certainly suspicious. We've got a possible alien invasion attempt in the sector, potentially aided by people within the Krellonian Star Alliance. The outbreak of a mysterious illness on a populated Krellonian colony within the same sector, and a suspicious Krellonian intelligence agent operating on that very same planet to unknown ends that has her own people concerned enough to break a century-old isolationist policy and invite us here."

The Trill took the chair Culsten had only recently vacated. "When I was a child, I was very fond of an Earth game called Connect the Dots," she said. "I have a growing suspicion that all these dots might fit together somehow."

"Just one problem. That game you speak of, it only works if you know how the dots connect to each other. So far we have no idea."

Star leaned closer. "Culsten's attitude towards all this is rather disappointing. I was hoping he'd be more cooperative in helping us solve this puzzle."

"In his defense, he doesn't yet know that there is a puzzle to be solved."

"Still," she said, shaking her head slightly. "He has not exactly been helpful so far when it comes to dealing with his own people."

"It isn't difficult to tell that he doesn't like being back here. He turned his back on Krellon a long time ago and I have to assume for good reason."

"He is also a Starfleet officer. We could order him to meet with his aunt."

This time it was Michael who shook his head. “How can I give that order when I can't even trust the very same people who have put us on this course to begin with? I won't force him to face a family he doesn't wish to deal with. Not unless I know for sure that it is crucial he does so. For now, we'll focus our efforts on learning more about this pandemic and help where we can. That might buy us enough goodwill with Krellonian leaders to learn more about any possible connections with the subspace aliens and their plans.”

Star seemingly knew enough about Michael's own family issues to know not to push him on this point and eventually nodded. “It would help if we could get access to the planet. And ideally, before Elijah hijacks a shuttle out of pure frustration and makes a run for the surface on his own.”

## 5

Ultimately, Elijah Katanga had not needed to hijack a shuttle and instead had managed to wear down any resistance simply by his sheer persistence and tenacity, tricks he was well versed in thanks to his long and established career in the medical field and working with foreign government officials who had, more often than not, been unenthusiastic about the notion of allowing alien medical personnel to get involved in internal health crises.

Elijah had not been above sending one communiqué after the next to anyone and everyone who could possibly speed up the process of allowing him access to the planet below. He had started with the captain, purposefully going around Star, he had practically spammed Owens' inbox with statistical reports that clearly demonstrated the death toll within an infected population, correlated directly with the time of intervention by knowledgeable doctors and researchers.

Of course, fully cognizant that the captain himself was not in a position to decide on this himself, he had started to send on those same reports, including case studies of various pandemics that had very nearly wiped out entire populations to Yorlo's ship, which had remained in close proximity to *Eagle* ever since his visit.

He had been undeterred when the Krellonian official had kindly asked that he ceased the constant stream of data he was transmitting. Instead, he had managed, with a little help from DeMara Deen, to get around the communications blackout on the surface and found comm addresses for the local government offices, the health department, and even the personal address of Chief Administrator Chella herself who had sent back more than a few biting replies, not at all appreciating Elijah's initiative.

But eight hours after Yorlo's first visit and the beginning of his relentless campaign, a somewhat exasperated Captain Owens had informed Elijah that Yorlo had managed to obtain permission for him and a small away team to beam directly into one of Piquis' medical facilities. Elijah, of course, had already been fully prepared once the word had finally come through. He had identified the members of his team he wanted to come along, had already arranged all the equipment and medication that he thought would be required, and was the first man in the transporter room, fully decked out in a biological isolation suit, ready to beam to the planet.

Star joined him and the medical team with Nora Laas just a few moments later, both dressed in the same containment outfits. "Alright, here are the ground rules we've been given and we've been told to strictly observe at all times," said Star, addressing the away team of five. "We are beaming directly into one of Piquis' main medical facilities that, as far as we are told, currently houses a large number of infected patients. We will arrive unarmed and after beam-in, we will be scanned by local security. We will then be escorted to a single wing of the hospital where we will have one standard hour to study a small number of patients. After the hour has expired, we are expected to leave the planet. Everybody clear on this?" While she spoke she kept her eyes solely on Elijah.

"Let's just get down there, shall we?" he said impatiently.

"Yes, let's go," she said but quickly stepped up to him and held on to his arm before he could go and join the others on the transporter platform. "We'll have another conversation about your unsanctioned information campaign later."

He regarded her with a scowl. "Got us results, didn't it?"

"Funny, here I thought you didn't prescribe to the theory of the end justifying the means."

"I subscribe to any theory that allows me to save lives while keeping the means justifiable," he shot back.

"Right," she nodded. "And you get to decide if they are?"

He freed his arm. "We're wasting time," he said and stepped up onto the platform.

Moments later the away team materialized in the medical facility. Elijah immediately identified the white, round, and mostly featureless room as some sort of quarantine chamber. It was barely large enough to accommodate the entire team and the bright light blinded him for a moment.

Star took a step forward. "Hello? My name is Commander Star from the starship *Eagle*. We've—"

"*Stay still*," the booming voice interrupted her. It was so loud and unexpected, it caused Elijah to reach for his head as he felt the sound waves penetrating his skull.

"Whatever happened to good old-fashioned hospitality?" Nora said.

"Let's just do as they say," said Elijah. "I'm sure this is nothing more than a safety precaution."

A buzzing sound filled the air and moments later various bright blue light beams began to sweep across the small chamber and over their bodies.

"What the Prophets?" said Nora.

"Medical scans. Standard procedure," Elijah said.

"A heads-up would have been nice," said the Bajoran.

The buzzing stopped as quickly as it had begun, as did the scans. The entire forward section of the room, which turned out to be a curved door, started to slide sideways to reveal the room beyond. Once it was fully open, Elijah could spot six figures in green isolation suits that were slightly bulkier than the Starfleet-issue version they were wearing. Four of the figures had sidearms strapped to their chest.

"*You may step out now*," the voice said, this time at a much more reasonable volume.

Star led the way but Elijah was only a step behind her.

The lead figure waiting for them, a woman of average height and middle age welcomed them. "I am Chief Administrator Chella. Welcome to Piquis." She sounded anything but welcoming.

“Thank you for having us, Chief Administrator,” Star said. “This is Doctor Elijah Katanga, our chief medical officer. Lieutenant Nora Laas, security chief, and Doctors Barry Nelson and L’Nel.”

Chella considered Elijah first and foremost. “Doctor Katanga. I have heard quite a bit about you. Most of it from you directly. And quite frankly much more than I would have liked. Before you leave you will have to share with us how you managed to circumvent the communications blackout.”

“I have to admit that those things are not within my expertise. Our time would probably be served much better if you could show us to your patients that have contracted the disease.”

Chella kept her displeased gaze on him a while longer. It bothered him very little. He had long since gotten used to the fact that people didn’t like him. He had been given that very same look by Star just moments earlier and as far as he was concerned, it was of little consequence what others thought about him as long as he got to do his job.

“Shall we?” he said with a forced smile on his lips.

“We’ll head directly to our main ward where we keep the worst cases. Don’t deviate from our directions and do not slow down or loiter until we reach our destination,” she said sharply and then turned for the exit of the preparation chamber.

Following her and her guards, the team stepped into a jade-colored corridor and the very first thing Elijah noticed was the many patients that were littering the walls of the corridor. Most of them were placed on mobile hospital beds but quite a few were on stretchers on the floor. His first instinct was to examine these people more closely and get some readings but the security guards behind him wouldn’t let him slow down.

A purely visual examination told him that the majority of these patients were likely at an early stage of this illness. All were displaying clear symptoms of immune system deficiencies, including low energy, clammy and pale-looking skin, and signs of mild respiratory distress, like coughing and difficulty breathing.

The fact that these patients had been placed in the corridor, further told him that the medical facilities on this planet had already exceeded their capacity. This pandemic was getting out of control.

“These patients right here. What stage are they?”

“We call this stage two,” said the man by Chella’s side. “Patients at this stage are no longer ambulatory and need to be hospitalized. Patients lose consciousness around stage four and become acutely terminal at stage five.”

“This is Urnea Turee,” said Chella, indicating to the man who had spoken. “He is the head of our health department. We have over two hundred highly trained physicians and researchers here on Piquis. To be honest, if they are unable to determine the nature of this disease, I don’t really see what you Starfleet types can do. I don’t believe for even a moment that the Federation has some sort of magical medical answer to the ills of the galaxy.”

“Perhaps not,” Star said. “But we might offer a new perspective. The Federation has accumulated medical knowledge from hundreds of worlds over many centuries. And we are more than happy to share any such knowledge that might assist you in treating this outbreak.”

Chella was not impressed. “You’ll find Krellonian physiology quite unique to what you are used to. I would be surprised if you have come across anything that could be useful to us,” she said without slowing her stride.

They stepped into a large, open-plan treatment room that was packed with occupied beds, allowing very little room for much else. It was in Elijah’s professional opinion, a terribly ineffective way to treat and examine patients with very little consideration given to medical staff and equipment. This, to him, looked more like a place for people to die rather than trying to save their lives.

Chella and her people finally slowed down, if for no other reason than that there was not enough space in the room to move quickly or at anything other than single file.

“These patients are mostly stage four and five,” said Turee who handed Elijah a medical padd containing information on one of the patients they had stepped up on, an unconscious young boy.

He reviewed the data and realized that this particular patient had apparently contracted the illness just six days earlier. He had moved through the stages of the disease surprisingly quickly, reaching stage three in just four days. According to the chart, he had entered the final stage a day earlier and had been given another two to three days at most. The patient was only nine years old.

“Is this rapid deterioration consistent?” Elijah asked as he kept reading the patient’s file.

Turee nodded. “Unfortunately, it isn’t uncommon. Children and the elderly are particularly susceptible. Patients normally expire between seven and twenty days after entering stage one and exhibiting early symptoms.”

“I would be interested to see the full work-up of the RNA decay for this patient and compare this with the breakdown rate for patients at all stages.”

Turee looked at Chella for a moment before glancing back at Elijah.

“Is there a problem with that?” he asked.

The administrator answered the question. “We don’t have full cellular work-ups of all patients,” she said, sounding somewhat defensive.

“What? Why not?”

“Look around you, Doctor,” Chella said, letting her anger peak through now. “We have thousands of patients all across the planet. We can’t possibly have work-ups for every single case.”

“We do have general samples for various patients at different stages,” said Turee. “There are at least thirty samples available to review if you wish.”

But Elijah quickly shook his head. “That’s not enough. Not for thousands of patients with such a high infection rate. I don’t care if you are human, Krellonian, or a Horta. Individuals do not all behave in the same manner. What might work for one patient is not guaranteed to work on another. We need much more data if we want any hope of getting to the bottom of this.”

Chella crossed her arms in front of her chest. “We don’t have the manpower or equipment for what you are suggesting.”

“That’s why we’re here,” said Star, quickly seeing her way in. “We are at your disposal.”

“And what exactly can the five of you do in one hour?” asked the administrator, clearly unexcited by Star’s offer.

“In one hour? Down here?” Elijah said. “Next to nothing. But we have a fully prepped medical facility set up on *Eagle* with enough capacity for at least two hundred patients and a staff of nearly as many medical personnel and researchers to work on live tissue and

blood samples around the clock. All you have to do is give the word and we can get started.”

It was Star who spoke up before the Krellonian could. “Doctor, I think perhaps we are getting a little ahead of ourselves here. We don’t even know yet what we are dealing with. There is a reason the planet is under quarantine.”

Elijah didn't appreciate Star's overly cautious attitude. She may have been Dezwin Star once, a brilliant physician in his time, but clearly, her medical instincts had been dulled ever since her symbiont had moved into a new host body. Or even worse, her priorities had shifted.

“There is no way I will authorize Krellonian citizens under my protection to be transported onto a Starfleet vessel to be subjugated to the Creator knows what kind of tests and probes,” Chella said. “Bad enough that I have to contend with one looming in orbit above my world.”

“Fine. There is no reason we cannot set up on the surface instead. Wouldn’t be the first time. It will take a little longer but I have everything already prepared. We can have a field hospital in place within a solar day.”

Chella shook her head. “No. I was willing to allow you to come down here and see what we are dealing with and share any data on this illness we have learned so far. But I will not allow Starfleet to set up any kind of facility on the surface, no matter how temporary.”

“Chief Administrator,” Star said, turning to Chella. “We have come here to help you in any way we can. To try and find a way to contain this pandemic and keep it from spreading and possibly devastating your entire world. But we can’t do this unless you let us.”

Chella stuck to her guns and Elijah had already stopped listening to the back and forth between the two women. Instead, he had stepped closer to the dying boy, looking over his thin and frail body, his now hairless head, the red rashes that had formed on his skin, and the shallow, uneasy breathing as he slept. He consulted the data chart again and after a moment found a way to compare his stats with those of other patients.

Nora noticed his preoccupation. “What are you thinking, Doctor?”

"I think that we can help this boy."

The Bajoran looked back at Star and Chella who were still arguing before she considered him again. "Doesn't look as if they really want our help on this."

He looked up. "There comes a time you just have to take the initiative."

"What does that mean?"

"A tactical move, Lieutenant. I'm sure you are quite familiar with the concept in your line of work. It's not all that different in what I do."

The security officer still seemed befuddled.

"It's time for a calculated risk and to force a decision," he said.

She quickly shook her head. "Not sure that's a good idea."

"As long as the means are justified," he said and reached for the seal of his suit that kept his helmet in place."

"Doctor, no," but Nora's warning came too late and she was not quick enough to reach him in time to stop him from opening the seal and pulling off the top part of his suit.

Star whirled around to look at him with total astonishment, along with the rest of the away team and the Krellonian delegation.

"Gods, Eli. What have you done?"

\* \* \*

She couldn't quite remember ever having seen him this angry before. Michael Owens was one of the most even-tempered people she had ever known, something one couldn't take for granted in a profession that tended to attract ego and ambition. At this present moment, however, his eyes looked as if they were on fire, even as they stared back at them via just one half of a computer monitor inside a small administrative office at the medical facility on Piquis.

Tazla Star knew exactly how he felt. After all, she was experiencing very similar feelings at present, still so upset over what had transpired a short while earlier, she didn't trust herself to speak and was thankful that the captain had started first, speaking up before she, or Yorlo, who took up the other half of the same screen

and looked just as exasperated, had the chance. *"Doctor, I have to say, I am extremely disappointed by your lack of judgment in this matter. Not only have you violated direct orders, you have put yourself and possibly the entire away team at risk by your actions."*

Katanga, who had since entirely removed his isolation suit, took the admonishment in stride, his arms stubbornly folded in front of his chest as if he was unwilling to accept that he had done anything wrong at all. *"The only person I have put at risk is myself."*

*"I disagree, but that will have to be a conversation for another time,"* said Owens via the comm channel, addressing him and the other two people with him in the office, Tazla Star and Chief Administrator Chella, as well as Councilman Yorlo who had joined this conference call from his ship. *"We need to focus on our next steps."*

Chella shook her head. *"Nothing has changed as far as I am concerned. The fact that one of your officers has purposefully exposed himself to this sickness is not relevant to our previous arrangement. Which, in case you have forgotten, is that you retrieve your team after one hour. That hour expired ten minutes ago."*

*"I am not comfortable with allowing a potentially infected person to leave the surface and risk further contamination,"* said Yorlo.

*"They brought this on themselves,"* Chella said. *"And the only contamination at risk here is to Starfleet. There is no reason for their vessel to have any further interaction with Krellonians after they have left orbit and returned to their space. Besides,"* she added and looked at Katanga. *"Did you not espouse the quarantine procedures of your own facilities? Return to your ship and leave us be. If you wish to study this pandemic further, you may do so on yourself."*

Katanga met Chella's infuriated gaze with his own steely expression. *"Let me ask you something, Administrator,"* he said and even Star noticed that the tone of his voice had noticeably softened. *"What exactly do you fear you stand to lose by our involvement here? And more importantly: Does it not outweigh what you might gain?"* He raised a padd he had been passed earlier and he had kept hold of. *"I've managed to run a few estimates based on the admittedly scant data I've been privy to so far. You currently have six thousand confirmed cases of the Piquis Plague."*

Chella frowned at the way he had coined the disease but kept her displeasure to herself for now.

“An average of twenty new cases are reported every day and every day you suffer at least ten fatalities. I'm not a mathematician but even I can tell you that at this rate, your little colony here is going to stop functioning very soon. You still have no viable treatment, you haven't even found a way to slow down this virus, and your quarantine measures, to be frank, are so inadequate, they might as well not exist at all. You're on the verge of losing control of this pandemic. In fact, I believe you have already gone over the cliff and are in a free fall. I guess the only question you have left to answer is: Do you wish your legacy to be the administrator who doomed her own colony or the one who was responsible for saving it in its darkest hour?”

## 6

“We have identified this abandoned quarry as an ideal location for the temporary facility. It is located in an unpopulated area, twenty-five point four kilometers to the north of the capital city. The hospital will have an initial capacity to hold one hundred and twelve patients and sixty members of staff.”

Michael Owens looked over the plan that included not just the modular design of the field hospital, but also a map of its proposed location, all displayed on the inset wall monitor of the observation lounge while Xylion talked him through the proposal. Tazla Star who had returned from the surface stood nearby as well while Doctor Katanga's image was displayed in a rectangle at the bottom of the screen, still at the hospital in the city on the surface.

“And Administrator Chella has approved all this?” Michael asked.

Star nodded. “Yes. We can't have more than fifty personnel on the planet and we are not allowed from entering the capital or any other population centers, but she has signed off on the location and agreed to give us access to patients for transfer and treatment at our facility. Under supervision.”

*"She's not exactly happy about it but in the end, it's the only choice and she knows that,"* Katanga said.

"She's not the only one displeased with how we got to this point, Doctor, I suggest you keep that in mind for when you return to the ship," Michael said sternly.

*"And I will. But you forgive me if I keep my focus on trying to find a way to stop this pandemic first."*

Michael turned to the Vulcan science officer. "How quickly can we get set up?"

"The base foundation can be completed within three hours. This will allow us to add the first module in six hours and twenty-six minutes. If we encounter no unexpected delays, the facility can be operational within nine hours."

"That's pretty impressive," said Michael.

"The plans are primarily based on Doctor Katanga's work," the Vulcan said.

Star glanced at the small image of the octogenarian physician on the screen. "You've planned all this, haven't you?"

He shrugged. *"You give me too much credit. But I did expect that we might be required to move our staging area to the surface. And I've had more than enough time to make preparations while we were sitting on our hands."*

Michael referred to his first officer, knowing full well her history, not just with Katanga but also with precisely this kind of work.

The Trill nodded. "It's definitely not the first time that we put something together in such a short time frame. When it comes to medical and disaster preparedness, every minute counts, so the quicker you can get your infrastructure in place the better. Eli and my former host worked hard to create a blueprint to allow such a rapid deployment."

Before Michael could respond, he was cut off by an incoming audio message. *"Bridge to captain."*

He glanced at the ceiling. "Go ahead."

"Sir," Lieutenant Stanmore, the beta-shift operations manager began. *"We're receiving a priority distress signal from the Agamemnon."*

That immediately captured his full attention. "Any details?"

*"No, sir. Just that they require immediate assistance."*

"Do we have their location?" asked Star.

*"She is still in the Diaspora. About half a light-year away."*

Xylion had naturally already made the calculations in his head. "We could reach the *Agamemnon* in eleven point six two standard hours at warp eight point five."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Owens out," he said, closing the channel and keeping his eyes on Xylion before letting them fall back to Katanga on the screen. "Gentlemen, this changes our timetable somewhat."

Katanga nodded. *"It is not ideal, but strictly speaking, we don't need Eagle to build the facility. We can transport all building materials and pre-fab sections directly onto the surface and assemble them there. It might take a little longer to bring it all together and it would be a tight fit for a couple of days but it can be done."*

"I agree with the Doctor," said Xylion. "We would also have to allow for an engineering team to join us."

Katanga was already thinking ahead. *"I'm sure I can get Chella to agree to a slightly higher number of personnel, especially if it means she won't have a Starfleet ship above her in orbit. Xylion, if you can organize matters on your end, I don't see why we can't have everything we need unloaded within a few hours if everybody chips in. Hell, compared to our timetable back at Yerendi XI, this will be a walk in the park."*

"Yerendi XI required us to transport medical supplies to a war-torn continent while we were being fired upon by both sides of the conflict," said Star with a small grin, recounting her adventures working with Katanga as part of the organization they had created. "I agree, I think we should be able to pull this one off."

But Michael had reservations, none of which were related to the efficiency of Xylion, Katanga, and the rest of his crew to build a field hospital on a mostly unknown world without a starship to support them. Bad enough that Donners and her ship were likely in trouble, he was concerned about the idea of leaving a sizeable number of his crew on a planet that so far had not shown itself to be mostly hospitable to strangers. The last few times he remembered being in similar situations, it had not worked out very well for them.

Katanga could spot his reluctance. *"I don't think we have much of a choice here, Captain. Naturally, we must respond to the distress signal but if we don't get started on building this facility now, we might never get*

*another chance. Not to mention that we're already way behind the curve in our battle against this disease. Any further delays may mean that any help we can provide will be too little too late."*

"Doctor, you do not need to sell me on the urgency of the matter, you've already done a more than adequate job on that," he said and then looked at Xylion. "Commander, liaise with Doctor Katanga on the surface directly. Bring in Lieutenant Hopkins and whoever else you need. Get me a feasible plan for making this work within the next half hour."

Xylion nodded but Katanga, unsurprisingly, was not entirely pleased. "*Captain, that will be another half an hour we'll lose while we await a decision. I would suggest –*"

"Duly noted, Doctor," Michael said but refused to let Katanga have his say this time. "Stand by, you'll hear from us shortly. *Eagle out.*" And with that, he tapped a command on the screen to cut the connection.

Xylion was already on his way out the door to prepare the report the captain had demanded.

Michael didn't speak until the science officer had cleared the room. "So help me God, one of these days I am going to lose my patience with that man."

"I think I may already have," said Star. "I have to be honest, I had forgotten how stubborn and obstinate he can be to work with. I had to deal with this kind of behavior for years and in hindsight, I should have taken better steps to find a way to curb his ways while he's serving on this ship."

Michael almost felt pity for his first officer. "I get the impression you might have more luck taming a *mugato* than getting Doctor Katanga to follow the rules."

"I hate to say it, and I certainly don't condone what he has done so far, but he has a point. I worked on enough medical emergencies to know that we are already on the back foot to try and find a way to slow down or even stop this pandemic."

He nodded. "I'm not disputing that. And I also know that Katanga's unorthodox methods may have just given us the opportunity to learn more about this potential threat Jarik is so concerned about."

"What do you want to do?"

He considered that for a moment. Just a few minutes ago, he had been fully determined to see things through, put as many resources and personnel as were needed on the surface to ensure Katanga had every tool at his disposal to find a cure for a deadly disease sweeping across that world. But things had changed and he could not ignore the urgency of *Agamemnon's* distress signal that not only meant that the ship and crew were in serious danger, but was also very likely related to their wider mission of trying to prevent a full-scale incursion. The distress call could have very well have been the first precursor. For all they knew, *Agamemnon* may have stumbled across an invading fleet.

"We'll have to pursue both for now. We can't afford to ignore either emergency. I want you to stay here along with Katanga and his team. Speak to Chella again if you have to, but I want a full security detail and every shuttle we can spare to stay behind with you until we can return. If things go poorly, I need to know that you have an exit strategy."

"Understood."

"And take Lif with you as well. I know he won't want to go but he remains our best option to learn more about any possible links between the Krellonians and these invading aliens. I am not going to order him to talk to people, but I want you to try and change his mind."

"Which will be much easier if he's on the same planet," she said and nodded. "We better get started."

"One last thing," Michael said before Star could leave the observation lounge. "This cannot become another Tiaita."

Star froze and Michael was fairly sure why. After all, their mission on Tiaita had ended in disaster thanks, primarily, to clandestine Federation involvement, including hers. He liked to think that she had become a different person since those fateful events had occurred.

"It won't be," she said resolutely.

He gave her a short nod, accepting that she'd do anything in her power to ensure it wouldn't. But even as he watched her leave, he wasn't entirely sure if it was going to be enough.



## Part Three: A House Divided

### 1

The northern continent of Piquis VII was a cold and barren place made even more inhospitable by the frigid gusts of winds that swept across the lands at irregular intervals and Tazla Star couldn't help but wonder who had thought it a good idea to establish a colony on this world.

From the little background she had been able to get her hands on, the Piquis system had once been a vital mining outpost for the Krellonian Star Alliance but those rich asteroids had long since been stripped bare and relegating the system as well as its only inhabited planet to near irrelevance.

It was perhaps for that reason that the central government had not mounted a larger effort to address the growing pandemic that had broken out here, or perhaps why Yorlo had been successful in lobbying for Starfleet assistance for a planet that in the grand scheme of things was not considered particularly significant.

Tazla watched through the windows of the runabout cockpit as a team of Starfleet engineers, led by Lieutenant Hopkins, were braving the cold and blustery conditions outside and setting up the field hospital. Three modules had already been set up; mostly living quarters for the sixty-something staff that would make this installation their home for the next few weeks, the larger modules containing the medical sections were up next.

The construction effort was proceeding on schedule, despite the inclement weather conditions, the lack of a starship in orbit to assist and the general reluctance of the local government in providing any meaningful assistance to Starfleet's undertaking that was aimed at helping fight their battle against a pandemic threatening to spiral out of control.

Tazla understood the challenges they were up against better than most, and not just because of her background in spearheading exactly these kinds of missions as Dezwin Sigus and later as Dezwin Star. If this had been merely a medical relief mission, the stakes would have been high enough already. As it stood, this was

potentially much more a threat not only to this relatively isolated colony but quite possibly to the entire sector and beyond.

To make matters worse, Tazla was presently the only person who had any knowledge of this wider threat, certainly amongst her own people, now that Owens had left orbit with *Eagle* to assist the *Agamemnon*.

She wasn't entirely comfortable with the idea of keeping secrets. And not because she didn't know how, in fact, much of her professional career had been spent gathering and containing classified information while working as part of Starfleet Intelligence. It had also led to the most disastrous decisions of not just her life but of the Star symbiont in general. It was little surprise then that she had hoped that she had left that aspect of her life far behind when she had become *Eagle's* first officer.

She heard the *Nebuchadrezzar's* airlock cycle open and turned from the windows just in time to see Katanga step inside, wrapped tightly in a thick, standard-issue, Starfleet cold-weather parker that he was quickly shedding along with the gloves.

Unexpectedly, he hardly even acknowledged her presence and instead walked right up to one of the computer stations in the cockpit and began to work the console.

"How's it going out there?"

He nodded. "Good. Hopkins clearly knows what she's doing. Wouldn't have guessed that, considering she is practically still a child."

It was true that *Eagle's* chief engineer had apparently been one of the youngest officers to hold that post when she had joined the ship after its commissioning, but Tazla knew she was in her early thirties now which certainly wasn't an unusual age for an officer in her position and definitely not after the Dominion War. "Compared to the two of us, most of our colleagues are children," she said with a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

He simply grunted an unintelligible response and refused to look up from his station.

Tazla had enough of this and stepped up closer. "Eli, we need to talk."

"A little busy here, *ma'am*."

She didn't miss, of course, how forced he had made the honorific sound. She walked right up to him and looked over his shoulder to see what it was he was working on. Quickly coming to the conclusion that it wasn't anything too vital, she slipped a hand onto the control panel and with two quick taps shut down the entire console, causing it to turn dark.

"What the hell?" he said angrily and looked up at her. "I was in the middle of coordinating patient relocation efforts."

She crossed her arms in front of her. "Considering we're still at least one day away from being fully operational, I think that can wait a few minutes."

"Every moment is crucial, you should know better than—"

"Spare me another speech about medical expediency, please. Yes, you are right, I do know. Since I helped write the book on it."

"Dezwin did," he said and stepped away in search of another console, no doubt.

"And all his memories are inside me."

"His memories perhaps," he said as he started on another console that was still operational. "Not so sure anything else made the transition."

She followed him across the compact cockpit. "You know what, I've had it with this. I really have. You want to play hurt and angry, go ahead, I can take it. But as you like to keep reminding me at every opportunity lately, I am your superior officer and I am entitled to a certain level of respect from you, no matter how you feel about me personally."

Katanga stopped in his tracks, squared his shoulders, and turned to look her straight in the eyes. "You are of course quite correct, Commander. So let us pause our time critical efforts to save an entire world from a deadly epidemic and instead discuss whatever it is that has you concerned about the perceived lack of respect you have been receiving as of late."

Tazla uttered a heavy sigh. Had he been any other man, as in, had he not been a dear and long-time friend of hers, as well as quite possibly one of the most experienced and gifted physicians in all of Starfleet, and had he not been the most critical piece to the puzzle of solving their current crisis, she would have wasted no time at all to relieve him of his duties, at least until he had cooled off a little.

And, of course, Katanga knew this as well. Knew precisely that she had no choice but to put up with him.

Yet she was not determined to give in so easily. "First of all, I want to discuss your reckless behavior in the hospital yesterday. That was entirely unacceptable and I will not tolerate this behavior from one of my officers, no matter the results."

"Noted."

She regarded him with a suspicious look. "Is that all you have to say?"

"What else is there? The only reason we are here now is because of my so-called reckless behavior. And considering that you're clearly not interested in any kind of justification for it, such as the fact that I was never in any kind of danger, I guess we'd better leave it at that."

That threw her for a loop a bit. "What do you mean?"

"We already knew that this disease was only affecting Krellonians on a planet that is populated by at least four other species, none of which, according to medical reports have shown any kind of symptoms. After that, it didn't take me long to determine from the medical charts in the hospital that this virus is targeting a specific RNA strand within the Krellonian genetic makeup."

"A strand that is missing in human RNA," she said.

"Precisely. As well as in Trill RNA and those found in other Federation races."

"And you came to this conclusion after spending just five minutes examining a Krellonian patient? I've been a physician, Eli. I know it has been some time since I practiced medicine, but even I know that that is not nearly enough time to form a valid, scientific hypothesis. Certainly not if you're planning to stake your life on it."

"I took a calculated risk based on the information available to me at the time. Even Commander Xylion would agree that it was a logical decision considering that we were about to be kicked out for good."

She shook her head, seriously doubting that the Vulcan science officer would have come down on his side of things on that one. "You don't know that. In fact, after what you did, Chella was more than willing to double down on her decision."

"I changed her mind though, didn't I?"

“Maybe you did. But I don’t see how your actions of exposing yourself helped.”

“They started the conversation, I thought that much was obvious. Now do you want to continue to discuss the wider implications of what I have done or can I go back to work and make sure that none of it will have been in vain?”

Tazla worked hard to keep her anger in check but wasn’t quite sure how well that was going. “Next time, you will consult with me before you even think of doing something like that again. Do I make myself clear, Doctor?”

“As crystal, Commander,” he said and then promptly left the cockpit, apparently having decided that he could get his work done much easier and without the threat of further interruptions in the runabout’s back compartment.

Tazla began to massage her temples to try and stave off an impending headache. Her tenure on *Eagle* had been difficult from day one, having brought with her a reputation practically burned to a crisp and trying to replace a highly respected first officer who had given his life to save his crewmembers. She had encountered nothing but mistrust from not only the people under her command but also from her own captain.

She had unexpectedly found a friend and ally when Elijah Katanga had joined the ship and things had steadily improved for her since then. Eventually, that trust that had long eluded the crew and the captain had finally started to come into play. Then the war had ended and things had looked bright for the first time in a long time for Tazla Star.

Good things, she had long since learned, were never meant to last.

## 2

He had never visited Piquis before but just being back in Krellon space, just a few weeks after he had reluctantly spent some of his

leave time on the homeworld and after nearly a decade in voluntary exile away from his people, this return to the Star Alliance was making him feel incredibly uncomfortable.

It had been bad enough that Yorlo had pulled strings to get *Eagle* redirected to Piquis, forcing him and his crew to delay their greatly anticipated exploratory mission, worse even, Yorlo had wanted him specifically, trying to rope him into what clearly amounted to some sort of personal vendetta against his estranged wife.

And after he had resolutely made the decision not to get involved in any of his uncle's schemes, the captain and the first officer had apparently decided that he should still remain behind on Piquis VII with the medical teams while *Eagle* was heading off to assist *Agamemnon*.

Star hadn't even given him a choice in the matter even though he had pointed out that as a pilot and navigator, his expertise was clearly not required for this mission and, in fact, would have been of far greater use to *Eagle* on her mission. Star had countered that his value came not from his limited medical expertise but that it was his knowledge of his own people that made him integral to the away mission.

He supposed it made a certain amount of sense to have a Krellonian take part in a mission to a Krellonian colony – no matter how much he'd rather have been a million light-years away from this place – he couldn't help suspect that more was going on here after both Owens and Star had asked him detailed questions about his meeting with his uncle.

He didn't care.

Intellectually, he knew that this attitude was not exactly befitting a Starfleet officer, not to mention one with command aspirations that were slowly gaining traction thanks to his recent promotion to full lieutenant. But there had been a perfectly valid reason why he had left his home all those years ago to seek a future within the Federation. He had made a conscious decision a long time ago to leave his home, and as far as he was concerned, it was not fair that he was being asked to come back to the one place he had tried so hard to get away from.

Lif had always considered himself a good Starfleet officer. He excelled at his job. Except for a few exceptions, he had always followed his orders the way he was supposed to, and he had put his life on the line to protect others, had even been formally recognized for his deeds. So then why could he not be allowed to have at least one weakness? One matter where he could decide not to get involved, at least not voluntarily? He knew that his uncooperative manner had likely already been noted by his superiors but then surely, he was not the only officer on the ship who was not always behaving the way everyone else expected him to.

It was clear that Doctor Katanga had been in a terribly poor mood as of late and that his scorn was mostly directed at Tazla Star. He had even disregarded, if not orders than certainly protocol when he had decided to expose himself to a potentially deadly virus while on the away mission to the local hospital.

DeMara Deen, usually the very model of buoyancy and optimism had not been her usual self as of late either and it wasn't easy to tell that her relationship with the captain seemed to have suffered as a result.

And Leva and Lieutenant Alendra were having some sort of fall out as well after having developed a very close working relationship ever since the tactical officer had returned from his last assignment and had brought the young Bolian officer with him.

People had personal issues from time to time, so why, he wondered, was it so surprising to others when he exhibited some as well?

In short, Lif was in a terrible mood and it certainly hadn't helped that the sonic shower in the tiny living compartment he was staying in on the runabout hadn't worked right since *Eagle* had left. An invigorating shower had always had a soothing effect on him.

"Alright, good. Now give me section four-baker right on these coordinates. Lif, do you have the junction segments ready?"

He glanced over to Louise Hopkins who was clad, like he was, in a red and white Starfleet-issue environmental suit. While they had not yet taken on any infected patients, and even though Katanga may have been rather cavalier about his own safety, he had issued strict orders to the rest of the team to wear the suits until further notice and once he had been able to rule out any airborne or environmental

factors that may have contributed to what had been come to be known as the Piquis Plague. Lif didn't mind wearing the suits since besides keeping them safe from any potential pathogens, it also kept out the cold thanks to its internal heating systems.

"Lif?" Hopkins said again, shooting him a look.

He nodded and then quickly entered a few commands into the large padd he was holding, a specialized model that was easier to use while wearing an environmental suit. Part of his job helping to construct the facility had been to ensure all the junction pieces that connected the various outer wall sections were in place and fully secured. Contemplating his misery of being on this Krellon colony had distracted him from this task.

Trying to draw away from his momentary lapse, he managed to find the right location for the next junction piece using the built-in scanner in the padd. "Got it. Coming now," he said and entered the right sequence.

Moments later, the transporter operator working in one of the shuttles, locked in on his coordinates and then beamed into place the junction piece from one of the many storage containers that had been brought down from *Eagle* before she had left orbit.

Hopkins looked over the five-meter-tall strut that had materialized at the end of the already present wall section. Instead of solely relying on her tricorder, she grabbed hold of the strut with one gloved hand and ensured it was solidly in place by giving it a few hard yanks. Then she nodded. "Looks good. Adeline, let's add the next wall section, please."

"*Energizing now, Lieutenant,*" the transporter operator responded via the comm channel.

Lif watched as a huge piece of curved, metallic wall shimmered into existence, connecting to the rest of the slowly growing structure via the junction rod. The latest piece made up almost half of the entire western wall of the facility and what would very soon be the main patient ward. A large elliptical window made out of reinforced transparent aluminum sat at the center of the section.

Only now that the window section focused on a specific part of the old quarry that had become their temporary home, did Culsten notice the arrangements of tatty and decidedly non-Starfleet issue tents and the people mingling among them. They were at least five

hundred meters away from the Starfleet installation, their shuttles and cargo containers, on the other side of a ravine that bisected the quarry floor, and at this distance, it wasn't easy making out details with the naked eye, but he was sure that the group was made out of very different types of people. Different races altogether, judging by the varying body shapes and sizes.

He took a few steps closer to the window to get a better look.

Louise joined him there. "They arrived here this morning. No clue how they found out about us. They must be desperate for a cure."

But Lif shook his head within his helmet. "I don't think that's why they're here."

DeMara Deen had joined the other two. "What makes you say that?"

"From what I've been told only Krellonians have been infected with the Piquis Plague. Those are all Outlanders."

"Outlanders?" Deen asked.

Hopkins answered that question. "Inhabitants from the outlying worlds around the central Krellon worlds. They were mostly conquered over the last few centuries and turned into slave labor. They used to be subject races not unlike those kept by the Romulans or Son'a."

Lif knew that Hopkins had learned about the Outlanders during their recent shore leave to the homeworld. The matter was much more complicated than she had made it sound but he didn't feel the need to elaborate on her point.

"Charming," Deen said. "But if they're not infected, what are they doing here?"

"Outlanders are not treated very well in Krellonian society and they tend to be of a poorer social-economic background. I wouldn't be surprised if they've come here looking for hand-outs," said Hopkins. "I feel sorry for them. We should try and help them."

Deen turned to look at the chief engineer. "That's not our mission. If we start helping these people where does it stop? Besides this seems like a purely internal Krellonian matter."

Lif didn't miss the surprised look Louise was throwing at the Tenarian. She did sound uncharacteristically detached and unemotional. She did, of course, have a point.

Without saying another word, the three of them went back to work.

But not long after they had fully completed the main sections of the hospital and the facility was truly beginning to resemble an actual structure, even if not the most aesthetically pleasing one, their attentions were once again directed towards the small settlement of Outlanders at the edge of the quarry.

More specifically it was the two large ground vehicles that came rumbling down the access road with loud, blaring sirens, that brought most of the work to a standstill as the Starfleet crew turned towards the commotion.

“That’s just what we needed,” said Hopkins. “Local authorities.”

Indeed, the vehicles quickly surrounded the tent settlement, causing a great uproar among the group, many tried to scatter away from the uniformed Krellonians streaming out of the transports.

The peace officers were all armed with what looked like batons of sorts and wore isolation suits. They were also efficient and violent in quickly subduing most of the Outlanders, not hesitating at all to use their batons on anyone who was not immediately surrendering.

“This is going to get out of control,” Louise said, mostly mumbling to herself as she and the others watched on from a distance.

Lif, of course, was well aware of the methods of local police against unauthorized Outlander activities and hardly surprised at what he saw. It was a sight he had hoped never to have to see again.

Hopkins was not content with simply watching on and quickly found Nora Laas who had emerged from one of the shuttles with four armed officers. “Laas,” she said and indicated at the scene. “We have to do something.”

But the Bajoran security chief simply walked over to her slowly, with her armed contingent following closely. Upon closer inspection Lif realized that the team following her were not standard Starfleet security personnel but members of the Niners, the Special Missions Team unit *Eagle* had recently taken on board. These men and women, from various different species, hardly looked anything like one expected from Fleet personnel. Some wore long, shaggy beards, they wore outfits that barely registered as a uniform, their weapons

appeared to have been heavily modified and some of them, like the hulking Nausicaan or the green-skinned Orion, didn't hail from races one expected to encounter commonly in Starfleet.

All four of them, as well as Nora, kept their eyes appraisingly on the commotion at the far side of the quarry even as they made their way over to Hopkins and the rest of the team.

"We can't just let them beat up on people like that," Louise continued when Nora had come closer.

"Commander Star's orders were pretty specific on this. We cannot get involved with local matters. We're just here to secure the facility. That's it."

"Yeah, we're just the babysitters," said the Boslic woman with the bright violet hair in a noticeably tedious sounding tone of voice. She seemed entirely indifferent to the brief glower the comment earned her from Nora.

Hopkins looked back at the Bajoran, shaking her head. "That isn't right."

"It's the Prime Directive," Deen said simply and then walked away to return to working on the facility. A moment later most of the others followed her lead, leaving the Outlanders to their fate.

Lif saw that Hopkins was less willing to let things go as quickly and he thought he understood why. Louise was a gentle soul but as an engineer who had always placed her work before most everything else, she had also always been one of the most sheltered members of *Eagle's* senior crew, barely taking part in away missions or getting otherwise involved in matters not related to her engines or technical systems.

Since they had begun their romantic relationship, he had learned that there was a lot more to her than her brilliant but technically-focused mind and that she cared deeply for other people. It was what he had loved about her but also what had started to create a rift between them after she had accused him of turning his back on his people and their social ills that had been so evidently displayed during their visit to the homeworld. The very same that were once again being aptly demonstrated just a few hundred meters away.

"I'm sorry, Lou," Nora said. "But Dee's right. This isn't our concern."

“I see. We come here to help these people from succumbing to a deadly plague but if they decide to kill each other we’re just supposed to stand back and watch on. Is that it?”

There clearly was nothing else Nora knew to say about this.

Lif placed a hand gently on Louise’s upper arm. “Come on, Lou, we still got lots of work to do.”

But she resisted him. At least for a moment, and instead regarded him with a particularly dark look, almost as if to say that all this was his fault. That if he had wanted to, he could have made a difference in the way his own people behaved.

Lif had already had this argument with her and was not interested in rehashing it. Especially not here. The notion that he could change the philosophy of an entire people remained absurd to him.

Hopkins’ stand didn't last long and her need to follow her own orders and accomplish what she had been asked to do ultimately won out over her sympathies for an unknown group of people. In a last sign of protest, she did free her arm from his hand, whirled around, and walked away from him to continue their task.

Lif exchanged a brief glance with Nora but she had nothing further to add and so he too went back to work.

\* \* \*

The security chief watched the team of ten technicians and engineers, including Deen and Culsten as they huddled together to discuss their next steps in putting together the facility before she directed her attention towards Sensabaugh, or Sensy as his Niners liked to call him.

The tall, muscular, bald, and full-bearded human considered her with calm and appraising eyes.

“Alright, we might not be able to get involved with what’s going on over there but I still want us to show some force and our general displeasure at what is happening.”

“One way of doing that,” said Petty Officer Toycel, or Junior as the large, but relatively young Orion was better known as, “is to walk

over there and tell those people to take a hike or else. They're not going to want to mess with us, I guarantee you that."

But Laas shook her head. "We're not going to provoke them that blatantly," she said and looked back at the squad leader. "Get your people to form a perimeter around the facility, facing the east side, make sure they do get a good look at you and your weapons."

"That ain't gonna do much," said Violet, the Boslic woman. "We just stand around here we don't look all that intimidating."

"Maybe not you," said Grunt, the Nausicaan who tended to say very little as far as Nora could tell. Of course, then again, the Niners had kept pretty much to themselves and didn't mingle with the rest of the crew. For all she knew, Grunt didn't stop talking when he was with his own people.

"I'll get some more members of my security team to join you," said Laas.

"Oh, sure, Fleet security. That'll make all the difference," said Violet in a particularly dismissive tone.

Sensy ended any further discussion on the subject. "Alright, folks, cut the chatter and get into position. No provocative actions. Just make sure they feel like they're being watched."

His team of three nodded as they set out to take their positions.

Sensy stayed put. "Can I have a word, Lieutenant?"

Laas nodded and the two of them walked over to one of the large containers holding various medical supplies and equipment and where they were mostly out of earshot of anybody else. "Is this where you apologize for the behavior of your team?"

He shot her an incredulous look. "I thought you said that you don't get offended easily."

"I don't. I suppose I'm just used to a greater amount of professionalism from the people I work with."

"I guess it's my turn trying not to be offended," said Sensabaugh. "But I can guarantee you that there is nobody out there who does the things we do better. That's the kind of professionalism we are proud of. But it comes at a price and I think you knew that when you got us to join your merry crew."

"Fine. I'm willing to let your people be the way they are. Just make sure you keep them away from the captain. I cannot imagine he would appreciate being talked back to in this manner."

"I'll make sure they are on their best behavior should the big man ever show up. In my experience though, the higher you go up that chain, the less likely you ever see them on the ground."

"You may find that Captain Owens will surprise you on occasions," she said, quickly coming to the defense of her commanding officer.

He shrugged. "We'll see. But considering that he's taken *Eagle* out on a joy ride out of here, that doesn't seem to be very likely anytime soon though, does it?"

"Maybe not. What is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Sensy took a moment to take in their surroundings, the half-completed facility, the still ongoing kerfuffle between the local security forces and the Outlanders, as well as the quarry in general that thanks to its depth, shielded them somewhat from the buffeting winds whipping across the surface of this part of Piquis VII. After a moment his eyes came to rest on her again. "All this. This mission of ours."

She considered him suspiciously. "Don't tell me you have concerns as well? I wouldn't think that contemplating our mission profiles is something that falls into your remit."

"It isn't. I don't care what our mission on this planet is. All I'm thinking about is how to do my job. And standing around and playing sentry isn't exactly what we do. Violet was right to be annoyed. We're not security guards, Lieutenant. If that's what you needed us for, you would've been better served sticking with the marines instead."

"I don't know what you expected, Senior Chief," she said, referring to his rank even though it had not eluded her that his own team barely ever used ranks when they talked to each other. "But starship duties are varied. Perhaps more so than you're used to. You might be required to do some mundane tasks from time to time. But since we have you, I'd rather make you stand around and look threatening while we don't need you, so that we have you ready to go when we do. Just don't let the downtime lull you into a false sense of complacency."

The squad leader looked at her as if she had just sucker-punched him. "Thankfully, I have skin just as thick as yours,

Lieutenant. Otherwise, I would have taken the implication of complacency as a personal insult.”

She smirked at that. “I can dish too, Sensy.”

“I can see that,” he said and then stepped away. He changed his mind, stopped, and turned to look at her again. “I understand that things are different serving on a starship. I accept that. But we are a Special Missions Team for a reason, Lieutenant. I would kindly ask that you keep that in mind. If it turns out that our skills and expertise are not truly what you require, I don’t believe that this arrangement will be fruitful. For either one of us.”

Lass watched him rejoin his people around the facility and couldn’t help but wonder if she hadn’t made a mistake in bringing him and his team to *Eagle*.

### 3

Michael Owens wasn't exactly a stranger to the incessant sensation of nervous anxiety. He doubted many starship captains could claim to be immune from experiencing such feelings. He liked to think that he had perfected how he hid those feelings from the people around him, after all, it was imperative that as a leader of men, he radiated strength and confidence to his crew even if he didn't always feel that way.

As far as he was concerned, when he sat in that chair, at the center of the bridge, anyone who happened to glance upon him needed to know that this was a man who knew exactly what he was doing and had the certitude to know how to do it.

It had been the same with the people who had come before him. Back when he had been a lowly ensign on his first assignment, the *Fearless*, he had looked at his captain and had known, almost instinctively, that he was the unquestioned leader and the very epitome of her ship’s name. And again, when he had served on the *Columbia* under Captain Mendez, he had never once doubted that the man in the center chair possesses the supreme confidence to guide his people through any storm. He had drawn strength from those people

and he was determined to follow their example now that he was the man in that chair.

It wasn't always easy to play that role. Not when he had to make choices such as leaving a large part of his crew to fend for themselves on a colony belonging to a people, if not outright hostile to the Federation, at least not exactly friendly either.

It was also difficult not to draw parallels to the last time *Eagle* had left an away team on a planet to answer a distress signal. Just a few months earlier, roles had been reversed, when Michael had stayed behind on a war-torn world with a small team while Tazla Star had taken *Eagle* to assist a fellow starship.

The mission had ultimately been successful but at a high price and Michael still wondered if he could have avoided casualties if he had given different orders, perhaps even decided against sending *Eagle* away.

And yet he had done the exact same thing again, hadn't really seen another choice at the time.

Even worse, the stakes felt personal, with Amaya needing his help after the cryptic distress signal she had sent, indicating that she was in serious trouble for which all help could already be coming too late.

"Lieutenant Stanmore," he said, addressing the operations officer at his forward station. With half his senior officers back on Piquis, he had to rely on the beta-shift relief personnel to step up. He was confident in their abilities, from Stanmore at ops, to young Ensign Srena at the helm and veteran science officer Xylion as his first officer, a role he was quite familiar with since he had filled that position on a temporary basis previously. Steadfast tactical officer So'Dan Leva was the only senior officer left on the ship who was not acting up in some sort of capacity. "Distance to the *Agamemnon*?"

"We are one hour and thirty minutes out from her last known position," the blonde-haired officers said.

"Mister Leva, anything on long-range sensors?"

"No, sir. But the high levels of particle radiation within the Amargosa Diaspora are severely limiting the range and effectiveness of the long-range array," the half-Romulan said.

Michael nodded. He had, of course, known this already but it had not stopped him from asking the question. He needed to know

*Agamemnon's* status. "Ensign, increase our speed to warp nine point six."

"Aye, sir, increasing speed."

He was almost relieved that chief engineer Hopkins wasn't onboard. She would have likely noted some sort of concerns over pushing their still new and untested engines this far. Then again, her absence also meant that they were missing their most experienced warp field specialist in case something was to go wrong with the engine. It was one of the reasons he had waited until now to put the pedal all the way down to meet the metal. The last thing he needed was to be stranded in the middle of nowhere, useless to both *Agamemnon* and his team left behind on Piquis.

"New ETA: Twenty-five minutes," said Stanmore.

"Yellow alert. Raise shields. Weapons on stand-by. I want all sensors locked in on *Agamemnon's* last known at maximum resolution."

The orders were quickly acknowledged by his efficient bridge crew and he thought he could feel the deck plates beginning to tremble underneath his boots. The new warp core was being asked to pump out more raw power than it had ever done before, energizing not just their high-velocity approach, but also the shield grid, the sensors, and feeding enough power into the phasers and torpedo systems to make them operational at a moment's notice. It was a lot of strain; he knew, but what better way to test a brand-new engine than by putting it through its paces?

"Mister Leva, once we drop out of warp, I want to be able to deploy the transphasic shields quickly. Depending on the situation, we might need to extend them around *Agamemnon* as well."

"Understood, sir," he said. "As you know the transphasic shield requires a significant amount of energy. We will not be able to engage warp drive while it is deployed and our weapons will be limited."

Michael stood from his chair and tugged at the bottom of his uniform jacket. "It's a sacrifice we may need to make if we are forced to play defense before we can go on the offensive," he said and looked at his acting XO next. "What is the status of sickbay if we need to take on wounded?"

"The majority of our medical staff has remained on Piquis VII. However, Doctor Nelson has prepared sickbay to receive casualties.

In addition, all crewmembers with basic medical training are standing by to assist if required."

"Sir, I've got her," said Stanmore, which immediately caused Michael to turn back around and toward the view screen that at present only showed a streaking field of stars.

Anticipating his next order, the operations officer tapped away at his console and the screen shifted to show the catamaran-shaped *Akira*-class starship.

Michael took a step closer to the screen, focusing on keeping his composure in front of the crew but also prepared to expect the worst. From the current angle, he could not immediately determine what was the matter with the other ship. "Magnify, please."

The image quickly zoomed in twice until she filled the entire screen. *Agamemnon's* dark gray hull gleamed under the lights of the many nearby stars and looked as flawless as if she had just rolled out of the shipyard. Of course, appearances could be deceiving. "Status report."

Xylion took that one. "All power levels on the *Agamemnon* are within standard operating parameters. Sensors are detecting a full crew complement. Deflector shields and weapon systems are powered down," he said and then looked up from the console he was working on. "Sir, I can detect no apparent sign of distress."

Michael took another step toward the floor-to-ceiling view screen, carefully studying the other ship. He had been in Starfleet long enough to know that starships could be in distress for many different reasons, some of which were not always immediately apparent. "Ensign, drop us out of warp here. Let's keep our shields up. We're staying at yellow alert until we know more."

"Dropping out of warp," the Andorian helmsman said, and not a moment later she had the ship back to sub-light, judging from the way the deck plates shifted as the inertia dampeners exerted their forces to keep them all in one piece during the sudden transition.

"Mister Xylion, begin a full sensor sweep of the area. I want to know of any possible threats within half a light-year from our position."

The Vulcan headed for the back of the bridge to take his more familiar position at the science station to give the task his full attention.

"Sir, we are being hailed," said Leva.

Michael felt the need to brace himself yet again before he spoke. "On screen, Commander."

Amaya Donners face appeared larger than life projected on the viewer just a few meters in front of him. "*Michael, glad you could make it here so quickly.*"

He considered her for a moment and judged her to be in good health and positive spirits judging by the subtle smile on her lips. "We answered your distress signal," he said, even if that much seemed obvious.

*"I understand."*

"What is the nature of your distress?" he said slowly, his relief of seeing her well and unharmed slowly beginning to abate.

She took a moment to answer the question, clearly picking up on his growing suspicion. "*To tell you the truth,*" she said. "*It's not so much that we're in distress than that we require your assistance. I apologize for the ruse but it was the only way I could make sure to get you out here without giving away the nature of our mission.*"

"You misused a distress signal," he said. It wasn't a question and he couldn't quite keep his voice free from accusation. He had never heard of a Starfleet vessel using a distress signal under false pretenses. In fact, he was pretty sure that there were regulations pertaining to this very thing.

*"If you want to get technical about it, then yes, I guess I did. But I had a good reason. Let me come aboard and explain why you're here,"* she said, her tone having cooled noticeably.

He nodded after a moment. "Very well. We should be in transporter range shortly. I'll see you then. *Eagle out.*"

Her image disappeared from the screen to be once more replaced by that of her vessel.

Michael turned away from the screen to regard his officers. "Stand down from yellow alert and drop shields. Ensign, bring us into transporter range."

Once again orders were quickly acknowledged and followed.

Xylion stood from his station and headed back towards the command area of the bridge to join with the captain. "Initial sensor sweeps have not detected any vessels or anomalies within range. I have initiated a more thorough scan of the area but the full result will

not be available until the scan is complete in approximately twelve minutes.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

Xylion still had more to say since he held his ground. “Captain, protocol would demand that we formally log Captain Donners’ misuse of a priority one distress signal.”

“Let’s hold off on this until we’ve heard what she has to say. If need be, I will mention it in my log,” he said, which seemed to satisfy Xylion. Michael hoped she had a damned good reason for what she had done. The idea that he had left Star and a large away team behind on Piquis for what had turned out to be a fake distress call vexed him a great deal.

Once again, and as he had done so often before, he did what he needed to do to ensure his emotions were not playing out on his face and give his crew any indication of the thoughts hidden beneath the veneer.

Presently, none of them were positive.

## 4

He had to admit that he was quite pleased with the work his team, as well as the engineers under Lieutenant Hopkins’ competent supervision, had accomplished in very little time.

The facility was mostly operational just twelve hours after the first foundation piece had been laid down even without the assistance of *Eagle* in orbit.

Some work still remained, not all isolation wards were fully functional yet and crew quarters had been de-prioritized in favor of more essential medical facilities on Elijah's instructions, meaning that for now, sleeping arrangements had been mostly relegated to the shuttles, the runabout, and tents, making it an adequate albeit uncomfortable fit for most of the away team.

Naturally, for Elijah, a bit of discomfort when dealing with a crisis was nothing new, nor of course, was a rapid medical

deployment under difficult circumstances. He knew that *Eagle's* crew lacked some of his significant experience and yet he had to admit that they had performed admirably when setting up the hospital to his specifications.

Administrator Chella who had remained highly skeptical of Starfleet's efforts on her world hadn't changed her tune much since they had first met her less than a day earlier and it was mostly thanks to her chief physician, Doctor Urnea Turee, who was clearly much more attuned to the value Elijah and his people could bring to the table in their fight against this plague, that the field hospital received their first patients even before the facility was fully up and running.

Elijah estimated that the hospital would reach full capacity by the end of the day, considering the pace at which new patients were being admitted, which perhaps didn't so much speak to the trust the locals were beginning to place in him and his team, but rather the desperation they felt and the urgent requirement for more space to house the increasing number of people affected by the Piquis Plague.

He had thrown himself into work, taking blood and tissue samples, cataloging data, and carrying out research even while the proverbial hammers were still banging away all around him, having long since learned to filter out the noise.

Along with his team of doctors and researchers, he had already made some early progress by the time Chella unexpectedly arrived at the facility, asking for a full inspection.

Naturally, he wasn't exactly enthused about the idea of having to stop work while showing her and Doctor Turee around, he nevertheless understood that they would require her further cooperation if they wanted any chance at making real progress.

As such he had agreed to personally tour the installation with both of them. And while he was convinced that what they had built here, in pretty much record time, was still superior even to the medical facilities he had seen in the nearby capital city, Chella remained unimpressed. Even when he pointed out the triple-reinforced force fields to maintain quarantine protocols, the various airlocks between each section to provide an extra layer of isolation, the state-of-the-art research labs in which his people were working tirelessly to analyze samples with the assistance of a computer core with enough processing power to control a starship, and the much

more organized observation wards, one for patients of each stage of the disease.

It was mostly Turee who nodded and asked questions as Elijah led them through the hospital and who showed some appreciation for what the Starfleet team had been able to accomplish.

Elijah, still the only non-patient in the facility without an isolation suit, had purposefully left the best part for last as he guided his two visitors along with Tazla Star to a set of observation windows that looked into yet another patient ward.

Differently to the ones they had already visited and that had contained Krellonians of various degrees of deteriorating health, the five patients in this ward looked fairly healthy, sitting up on their beds, some even standing, and talking to each other.

"A control group of some sort?" Turee asked as he carefully studied the two women and three men inside the room.

"Good guess," said Katanga with a smirk. "But no."

"So then what am I looking at, Doctor?" Chella asked with much less patience. "Are you telling me that you are keeping healthy Krellonians confined in this facility for no good reason?"

He shook his head. "Oh there is a very good reason for these people to be here, I assure you. You see, up until last night, four of these patients had been diagnosed as early stage one. Berina over there," he said and pointed at the young woman now laughing with another patient, "was closer to stage two."

That left both the Krellonian doctor and the chief administrator speechless for a moment.

Elijah took the opportunity to explain further. "It is too early to say for sure if the remission is permanent but the signs so far are encouraging. At least for these patients. Unfortunately, we have seen no improvement in a dozen others who were subjected to the same treatment. But it is a start."

Turee turned to Katanga. "What kind of treatment?"

His smile widened a bit. "Well, Administrator, you were quite right to point out that Krellonian physiology is rather unique and that it was unlikely that we had come across a similar physiology or genetic makeup in other races within or without the Federation. However, we did find a surprisingly similar DNA match in our database. It belongs to a non-sapient insectoid species that developed

on Archer VII over the last few million years. There aren't many obvious physical similarities between that species and Krellonians but genetically the differences are minuscule. We were able to replicate certain nucleotides based on that species' DNA that have proven to be resistant to the active retrovirus that spreads the infection."

"Are you telling me that you've taken some insect DNA to alter the genetic makeup of Krellonians?" Chella said, sounding anything but pleased. Even Star looked at Elijah with obvious concern at the implications.

He quickly shook his head. "We have not altered the genetic makeup of these patients. That would be immoral and highly illegal within the Federation. Instead, we used the replicated nucleotides to create a vaccine to help fortify the infected cells against the virus."

"I still don't like it," said Chella. "The notion that you used some primitive life form's genetic material for a vaccine for Krellonians doesn't sound right to me."

"A great many of those so-called primitive life forms are very close genetic matches to higher, sapient races like ourselves," said Tazla Star who had kept mostly quiet while Elijah had shown them around the facility. "On Trill, for example, a species of small and furry anthropoid primates share nearly ninety-nine percent of our DNA. I wouldn't be surprised if the same was not also true for some sort of animal on your homeworld that nowadays probably shares very few if any physical resemblances to Krellonians."

Turee nodded in agreement but Chella seemed to have a more difficult time accepting this. "I don't like it," she said again. "But if there is a chance that this will slow down or even stop this pandemic, I suppose I'm willing to give this a try. I expect to receive regular updates on your progress, Doctor."

"Of course," Elijah said quickly.

"Administrator," Star began. "Before you leave here, I was wondering if we could talk about another visit to the city. I think we should take this opportunity to learn more about each other's people. This could be a great first step to demonstrate to our respective governments what we can accomplish if we join forces and cooperate."

Elijah had to give Star credit for the attempt of trying to improve relations with the notoriously xenophobic Krellonians but he had to wonder if this really was the best time to push for interstellar relations. He would have preferred if she kept her focus on trying to cure this disease instead of making diplomatic inroads.

Considering his strained relationship with her at present, he decided to keep those thoughts to himself for now.

"I've already made it clear that any further visits to the city or any other population centers are out of the question. You are here for one purpose and one purpose alone, Commander. I have no interest in learning more about your people and to be quite frank, I'm already unhappy about the extra strain on our resources to provide security for your facility."

Star got the hint that she was not going to make progress with her current approach and quickly shifted gears. "I understand. Of course, if we are a strain on your security resources, I'm more than happy for you to redeploy your security teams elsewhere. I'm certain our own security is more than adequate to handle the occasional group of Outlanders drifting by."

"The fact that you have even brought armed personnel onto Piquis soil is still a thorn in my side, Commander," she said bluntly. "And I certainly will not keep you here unsupervised. Besides, you are dangerously underestimating what the Outlanders are capable of. They may give the appearance of being hapless and disorganized but don't let that fool you. It's the Outlanders who have brought this plague upon us."

Seeing that the Trill first officer could not win with the administrator, no matter what tact she was employing, Elijah decided to speak up. "It would be incredibly beneficial for our efforts to learn exactly how they have accomplished this," he said. "Any evidence you could provide on how the virus has been dispersed would be helpful."

"We are still working on collecting the evidence," offered Turee. "But since we are yet to fully understand how this virus operates, we are not really in a position to determine how it was weaponized in the first place."

Chella aimed her dark eyes at the Federation doctor. "I expect you to come up with some valid theories, Doctor. You have made a

strong case for your presence here and I will not be satisfied until you can show me results." She pointed at the recovery ward beyond the observation window. "That is not a bad start, but you will need to show me much more than a few people walking around because of some insect serum you concocted before I am willing to consider tolerating your continued presence on my planet," she added before she turned on her heel and headed for the nearest exit.

Turee stayed just a moment longer as if to silently disagree with his superior before he followed her to the exit.

Star looked at Elijah. "Not easy to impress her, is she?"

"We're not here to impress her. We're here to find a cure."

## 5

Since it had already been proven that Krellonians were highly susceptible to the Piquis Plague, and to further minimize any chances of accidental exposure, Doctor Katanga – who had more than once voiced his displeasure to Commander Star for including Lif on this mission in the first place – had instructed that he stay on the runabout instead of joining the rest of the team in the living quarters of the recently completed medical facility.

Louise Hopkins had agreed to keep him company at night – albeit in different bunks, since their relationship that had started well after a long friendship a few months earlier, had encountered some troubles in recent weeks and after their shore leave to the Krellon homeworld.

Hopkins had accused him of turning his back on the plight of his people, or more precisely, that of the Outlanders, by running away from his home and refusing to involve himself in anything that could potentially improve the conditions in the Star Alliance while Lif was angry at her for judging him based purely on a single visit to his home, even if it had been an eventful one, and accusing her of applying her Federation morality indiscriminately, without fully appreciating the issue or, in fact, his own, personal history with the problems his people were still facing.

They had made small strides in trying to overcome this rift that had opened between them, even if they had put their romantic endeavors on pause for now.

For this particular mission, the highly modular design of the runabout had been configured primarily for medical purposes with only a small number of very compact crew cabins. But Hopkins had found a little bit of space in the aft section where she had placed a tri-dimensional chess set on a crate, with two more containers functioning as improvised seats.

He knew that chess had always been one of her favorite pastimes, perhaps because the logical aspect of it appealed to her, and she had eventually managed to get him hooked on the game as well.

"That sonic shower is still on the fritz. Any chance you can work your magic on it?" he said while she sat cross-legged on the crate opposite his, studying the multi-layered boards to consider her next move.

"I'll try to look at it in the morning," she said, without taking her eyes off the set. "I can't make any promises though. As far as priorities are concerned, creature comforts are not on the top of our list."

"It's on top of mine," said Lif who was leaning back against the bulkhead behind him, his arms folded in front of his chest.

She shot him a brief look, smirking. "I'm sure it is. But Doctor Katanga doesn't see it that way. He's thinking about finding a cure for this virus pretty much twenty-four seven," she said and then refocused on the board.

"The man is a medical genius. He's been doing this kind of thing longer than the two of us have been alive. If there is somebody I trust to find a cure, it's him."

Hopkins moved her black rook to the second board from the top and captured one of his white knights in the process, taking it off the board. "Did you give any more thoughts to meeting with your aunt?"

He shook his head. "I couldn't even if I wanted to. Administrator Chella has made it quite clear that we are not welcomed in the city."

"Starfleet isn't," she said. "I'm not sure if she could keep you from going if you went as a fellow Krellonian civilian. Besides, from

what you've told me about your meeting with your uncle, I'm sure he'd be more than happy to pull the necessary strings."

"Perhaps," he said without making eye contact.

"Your move."

He glanced back at the chess set, found his bishop on the lowest plane, and captured a black pawn on the board immediately above.

"So then there's probably nothing stopping you from going to see her," she said, looking right through the three-dimensional chessboards. "If you wanted to go, that is."

"I still don't."

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm getting that," she said and moved on his queen.

"I don't get it, you know."

Hopkins looked up again. "You don't get what?"

"Why this is all such a big deal with everyone. For the first couple of years I've known So'Dan, the merest mention of his Romulan roots would have put me at serious risk of getting my head chewed off. Laas practically never talks about Bajor either and I don't think she has been back there since she left as a child. But when it comes to me, and I show any kind of reluctance to deal with my people, I'm considered out-of-line and uncooperative."

She shrugged. "Maybe it's because you haven't earned the same reverence yet."

He moved another pawn to take a pawn. "I'm a full lieutenant now, same as Laas. I should get the same respect extended to me."

She threw him a disbelieving look. "You want to be compared to Laas? Are you serious? She's the head of security, you're the helmsman. She started fighting the Cardassians on her homeworld when she was a preteen. She escaped that world almost single-handedly while she was an adolescent and she distinguished herself over and over again as a Marine and later as a Starfleet Security officer."

"I've achieved things, too."

"I'm not denying that," she said and took his pawn he had just moved.

"And you can barely be objective on the matter."

That garnered him another glare. "Why, because Laas and I are friends? I am friends with you too, last I checked. Maybe even a bit more than that."

He just grumbled at that unintelligibly.

"And you know what else separates you from Laas and So'Dan? They don't spend their time pouting about the unfairness of the universe, especially not when their input could be critical to the success of a mission."

"What success could I possibly contribute to?" he said. "I'm no medic. There is no point in me being here, Lou."

"What about during that incident at the border? From what I heard you were anything but helpful in trying to de-escalate that situation. Your move, by the way."

He ignored the board. "That's not fair. Just because I'm Krellonian doesn't mean I hold any kind of sway over my people."

"Your uncle doesn't seem to agree."

"My uncle is a fool," he said and moved his remaining knight to threaten the black queen.

Hopkins shook her head. "That's not a good move, Lif."

He glanced at her, trying to understand if she meant his play on the chessboard or something else entirely. "Too bad, it's the one I'm making."

She shrugged and placed her bishop within striking distance of his king, taking out his knight while doing so. She didn't need to say it. *Check.*

He rolled his eyes. "I don't even know why I still play with you. You always end up winning."

"You're not a bad player, Lif. If you focus on the game that is."

His response was cut off by the shuttle's red alert klaxons coming to life.

Hopkins jumped to her feet. "What's going on?" she asked, clearly confused by hearing that sound while the ship was positioned firmly on the ground.

Lif was on his feet within a moment also, already heading toward the cockpit at the front of the craft. "The sensors must have picked up a threat in the area."

"What could be threatening us out here?" she said as she followed him out of the aft section.

Once in the cockpit, Hopkins quickly accessed the sensor console and quieted the alarm, leaving it to continue flashing its crimson warning lights instead. "Multiple non-Starfleet life-signs detected near the supply caches. I think we are being raided."

Lif was already in the process of pulling on his isolation suit and a moment later Hopkins followed his example. After a couple of minutes and once they had checked each other's seals, they both retrieved hand phasers from the equipment locker and stepped outside.

They each needed a moment to find their footing once they had emerged from the airlock as the winds had picked up and were forcing them back toward the runabout.

Lif helped Hopkins to steady herself and as the gusts lessened a bit, they began to make their way to the supply cache, an arrangement of a few dozen large cargo containers, some stacked on top of each other, each at least half the size of the runabout itself and creating, in essence, a small container city with narrow alleyways between the bulky crates for access.

The area was not lit very well at night, in fact, the only light came from the runabout and the main facility at least fifty meters away. With the sun having long since set, the container city stood in almost complete darkness.

"Maybe we should wait for reinforcements," Hopkins said as she let her wrist beacon sweep across the now ominous-looking containers.

"Right, let's wait for the fearless, former independence fighter and marine to take care of this. After all, a lowly helmsman won't be able to deal with intruders," he said, unholstered his phaser, raised his beacon, and began to slowly step into the narrow alley between two rows of containers.

"You're lucky I'm not a counselor," she said and followed him in, with her own phaser in hand. "Otherwise, I would think you're suffering from a serious complex."

He hushed her. "There's somebody here," he whispered and indicated the junction up ahead.

She nodded as they both pressed themselves against the container and very slowly moved along the length of it until they reached the edge. Lif looked at her and mouthed the words, *on three*.

When she nodded her understanding, he silently began to countdown.

They jumped out with their phasers at the ready on his mark, seeking to confront whatever foreign intruder had trespassed.

There was nobody there.

Too late did Lif realize that the threat was behind them and that whoever they were, they had both him and Hopkins dead to rights.

“Drop it now,” the gruff voice snarled.

They looked at each other and then dropped their phasers, realizing that they had little choice in the matter.

He ventured a glance over his shoulder only to be blinded by a bright light being shined directly into his face.

“Who told you to turn around?” asked another voice, this one distinctly female.

Lif angrily picked up his phaser again and turned around fully to face the two SMT operators who had their weapons and lights pointed at them. “You mind getting those things out of our faces? We’re not the intruders here.”

Hopkins followed suit.

“Probably because they ran away from all the noise you were making back there,” said the Boslic woman who had lowered her weapon but kept her light pointed at him. She stepped closer only to push herself past both of them.

Her companion, the large Orion Lif believed went by Junior, skewered them both with a disapproving glance. “Next time, wait for the professionals,” he said as he followed the Boslic.

Hopkins gave Lif a telling look. “I think that’s what I was saying.”

He dismissed her and followed the operators.

After a couple more junctions they met up with Nora Laas and Tazla Star who like the others were wearing isolation suits. Nora wasted little time indicating at a nearby container, giving hand signals that Lif interpreted to mean at least four intruders inside or around that container.

Under Star’s instruction, the team split up, with her leading him and Hopkins and Nora taking the two Niners to approach the container from two angles.

Only a few meters out, Lif could see a humanoid figure huddling by the container doors that had been forced open.

“You there. Stop what you’re doing and lay face down on the ground,” Star called out to the person, raising her phaser rifle.

The intruder responded by firing his weapon at them. Lif and the others dropped onto the ground for cover and the poorly aimed shots only struck the container behind them.

A single phaser blast, coming from somewhere on the other side of the intruder, hit him square in the back and he fell.

A commotion within the container ensued and four more figures appeared. Lif began to fire on the targets but it was difficult to make them out in the darkness and he didn’t dare use his beacon and give the intruders an easy target.

Instead, he used the ambient light created by their suits and phaser blasts. Most of their shots seemed to hit little more than the containers, as did those from the intruders.

“Cease fire,” Star ordered. “We are storing sensitive medical equipment here. We can’t risk it being damaged or destroyed.”

Lif understood that she was more concerned with the intruder's weapons fire since their own phasers were set only to light stun, meaning that they wouldn't damage solid material. The weapons of the intruders, on the other hand, were scorching and piercing the containers. Star was clearly hoping that by stopping to return fire, it would eventually cause the intruders to cease shooting as well.

Her tactic paid off. After a few more blasts clearly intended as covering fire, the intruders made a run for it. Lif could see that there had to be at least six of them, not counting the one they had already stunned.

Four managed to slip away while the two staying behind to cover their retreat didn’t get far. The first was taken down by the Boslic who – to Lif’s utter surprise – came flying down from the top of the container to rip him off his feet. She followed up with a couple of well-placed hits with a collapsible baton she was holding and the intruder was incapacitated.

The second one was easily dispatched by the Orion who despite his size had appeared out of seemingly nowhere, using the distraction caused by his fellow Niner, he had picked up the much smaller intruder and unceremoniously flung him against the wall of a

nearby container where he sagged to the ground. Nora Laas stuck a phaser in his face before he could even think about standing up again.

Star stood from her crouched position she had since adopted and quickly joined the rest of the team, with Hopkins and Lif bringing up the rear.

“Seven hostiles,” said Nora as she watched the Orion secure the downed intruders with restraints. “Three neutralized, four more on the run.”

Lif looked over the intruders and noticed that all three were Outlanders, two lupine T'aq, and one humanoid Kridrip.

“Get a security team to pick these up. Let’s get the others,” said Star.

Nora nodded and called it in before she followed Star and Hopkins the same way the intruders had taken for their escape. The Boslic – her isolation suit barely even slowing her down – took the high ground by pulling herself up onto the container. Junior had already faded into the darkness somewhere.

Lif quickly caught up with the rest of his people. They reached the edge of the container park and he could see the four figures fifty meters or so ahead, trying to make it to the edge of the quarry.

They didn’t get there. Just after traversing the small, improvised bridge across the steep ravine that bisected the quarry, two armored vehicles came careening down the access road and intercepted them, cutting them off from their escape route and lightening up the area with bright floodlights. A third vehicle blocked them in when they tried to change direction.

Lif watched as local security forces clad in isolation suits streamed out of the vehicles and immediately began shooting at the Outlanders. Two went down instantly in the hail of weapon’s fire. The other two were struck as well but managed to keep on their feet, at least briefly.

“Hold your fire, hold your fire,” Star shouted even as she and the others rushed toward the scene.

The commander of the security forces signaled his people to stop but they kept their weapons firmly trained on the two remaining Outlanders who were now huddled together, holding their wounds

and entirely surrounded by the security forces and the Starfleet team coming up behind them.

Lif was out of breath by the time he managed to join up with Star, Nora, and Hopkins, all four of them keeping a respectful distance from the local security team.

Star was already conversing with the commander. "It's not that we aren't appreciative of your assistance," she said, looking over the two intruders who had been shot. One of whom, a brown-scaled reptilian Zel, was no longer moving and a green blood-like fluid was oozing out of multiple wounds. The humanoid Kridrip was writhing in pain, also having been shot numerous times. "But I think you've done enough."

The commander shook his head. "Security is our concern. If anything, you have done too much. You should not have gotten involved here."

Nora shot the man a dark look. "Considering that they were stealing from us, you can't expect us to just stand around and do nothing. We already incapacitated three of their compatriots. Without having to resort to bloodshed by the way."

"You will hand over these criminals immediately," he insisted.

"Seeing your handiwork and the way you have treated these people, it may be best if we hold on to the wounded for now," said Star. "At least until their injuries have been seen to."

But the commander frowned and resolutely shook his head. "Unacceptable. These people are dangerous criminals and must be incarcerated. A judge will determine their fate."

Hopkins had walked over to one of the backpacks that the intruders had dropped in the commotion. She looked inside and then at Star. "All they've taken are medical supplies."

The commander nodded. "Precisely. To make more biological weapons to use on our people."

"Or maybe to treat their wounded," said Nora. "I would imagine the local hospitals are not in a rush to take any more patients with the pandemic what it is."

"Let us take care of the wounded. We will hand them over to you once they have been stabilized," said Star. "It would also be helpful to study precisely why these Outlanders are immune to the virus. It might help us find a cure."

The commander walked over to the bleeding reptilian still on the ground "It's too late for this one, he's already dead," he said as he nudged the body with the tip of his boot and elicited no reaction. He stepped up to the humanoid next. "This one is very close."

"Then let us take—"

Star didn't get a chance to finish her sentence as the commander raised his weapon and shot the injured Kridrip right in the head, the blast pretty much evaporating his skull.

Hopkins wasn't able to suppress a shocked gasp at watching the execution taking place right in front of them.

Nora and Star watched on in astonishment.

"That wasn't necessary," Star said angrily.

"You are guests here, I suggest you keep that in mind," he said and aimed his weapon at the two remaining Outlanders.

"Don't do it," Star said through gritted teeth, raising her phaser rifle.

*"I would listen to the lady, brother. You take that shot and you're the next one to drop."*

The commander looked up but was unable to see who had spoken. Lif knew the voice belonged to Junior and he was fairly certain that he must have climbed on the top of one of the armored vehicles, the bright lights hiding his bulky frame.

"You wouldn't dare," he said, fuming. His men now aiming at the Starfleet team, at least those they could see.

Star seemed unperturbed by this. "You know what? You're right. I won't open fire on you and neither will any of the people you see here. But the thing you should know is that the two people you can't see, those who presently have their weapons aimed at your head, they're somewhat new and not used to doing things my way. Unfortunately, that also means that they may take that shot with or without my order. And, differently to me, they won't care about the consequences."

The commander looked directly into Star's eyes, trying to decide if he was going to call her bluff. Finally, he lowered his weapon and told his people to do the same. "Keep them then and treat their wounds. But don't be surprised when they stab you in the back the moment they are well enough to hold a knife."

Star nodded. "We'll take precautions."

"You will also allow a security team to remain in your facility."

"Done."

"And rest assured that I will file a formal complaint about what has happened here with the chief administrator's office."

Star offered him a smile even if it lacked any genuine humor. "She'll have two of those then."

The commander indicated to his men to board their vehicles again, which they did with little delay before he followed them inside. The vehicle's floodlights were switched off and replaced by much dimmer operational lighting and even after Lif's eyes had readjusted, he couldn't see any sign of the two SMT operators.

Nora had joined Star in the meantime. "I hope you know that they wouldn't have fired without direct orders."

"Maybe. The important thing is that he didn't know that," she said. "Now, let's get these people some medical attention. And I want a full security detail on them at all times. It also looks as if we're going to have some more guests," she added as she glanced at the vehicles that had not yet moved. "Goes without saying we need to keep an eye on them as well, considering their proclivity to shoot first and ask questions later."

Nora nodded sharply.

Hopkins had holstered her phaser again and was beginning to make her way back to the runabout. "Still think you can't contribute to try and fix this mess?" she said under her breath as she passed Lif, not waiting for a response.

In truth, he had none to give her.

## 6

She had beamed on board pretty much as soon as *Eagle* had entered transporter range and then had made her way up to his ready room next to the bridge without an escort, as had been her wont lately, not content to wait for Michael or one of his officers to come and collect her.

Amaya Donners had also forgone the usual pleasantries, ostensibly since they had met only a few days prior.

"We've made some real progress out here in tracking down the subspace aliens and I believe we have found a way to open a gateway into their domain, and possibly preempt any invasion attempts. However, we will need to —" She stopped herself mid-sentence after getting a good look at Michael's facial expression he had been unable to keep from revealing his concerns. "You're still miffed about the distress signal," she said, correctly interpreting what he had been thinking.

"Wouldn't you be? We were in the middle of a mission back on Piquis that your fake distress call interrupted."

"I gathered from your last status update that you were not making any progress in getting access to the surface."

"Things have moved on. We were in the process of establishing a medical facility on the planet when your signal came in."

Amaya took one of the guest chairs in the ready room. "I didn't know that."

"I had to make a tough call. I left a sizable portion of my crew on Piquis, among a people with whom we're not exactly on the best of terms. I did that believing that you were in trouble and needed immediate help. And now I find out all of this has been nothing more than a ruse to get *Eagle* out here."

She seemed to consider her next words before she spoke. "I didn't realize you were in that position. But it doesn't change things. You're here now and they're back on Piquis. I have to believe that you wouldn't have left them behind if you believed that they were in any real danger there."

It hadn't been what he had wanted to hear from her. He wasn't sure what he had expected. Perhaps an apology, some sort of contrition over her actions maybe which, after all, were in flagrant violation of Starfleet protocol. But Amaya was playing the role of Starfleet captain to perfection, with no hint that she was not entirely confident of her own decisions. It was a role he understood well, of course, but considering that they were among equals now, considering their relationship, he had expected, or at least hoped, that she would be willing to open up to him, treat him like a real person,

instead of just another officer she needed to shield her real emotions from.

She could clearly tell that he was not being swayed by her arguments and carried on. "Listen, I understand that this wasn't ideal. I understand you're upset and I probably would be as well if I were in your position. But none of this changes the fact that I need you here," she said, softening her voice slightly, sounding almost like the Amaya of old, the woman he had fallen in love with probably as early on as their Academy days. But that tone soon changed as she stood again. "Your mission to Piquis was a crapshoot, Michael. A long shot created by an unexpected opportunity. Jarik seems to believe the Krellonians are somehow involved with the subspace aliens but there isn't any substantive evidence I've seen to support that theory."

"The disease ravaging that world is very real."

She offered a nod. "I'm sure it is. And I'm sure it's tragic. I hope your people can find a way to help them and who knows, in doing so we might even be able to improve relations with the Krellonians after the centuries they've spent in near-isolation. But building diplomatic bridges is not why we're out here. We're attempting to prevent an invasion and this won't happen by trying to play nice with the Krellonians. The invasion, we know, will start right here and we may have found a way to stop it before it can start."

He looked up at her bright, shimmering eyes as she spoke, and couldn't quite shake the feeling that she was reading him the riot act. He was the more senior captain between the two of them, had been in rank almost a year longer than she had been, and yet here she was, taking charge and expecting him to toe the line. He had no intention of challenging her since it was obvious that she had been read into their mission in far more detail than he ever had. But her lack of deference bothered him somewhat. "Why here?"

She regarded him with a quizzical expression. "What?"

"This invasion; why will it start here? The Amargosa Diaspora is not exactly a strategically valuable sector of space. Most of it is uninhabited and almost all of it sits outside our borders. Other than an abundance of stars, there isn't really much out here. The entire sector is a nightmare to navigate, the Krellonians don't venture out here either and beyond Arkaria there aren't any noteworthy

Federation outposts or planets for light-years. What would make this sector so inviting to launch an invasion?"

"Perhaps it's all those factors you've just mentioned. As you said, there isn't much here. That also means it is poorly defended. Besides, the argument is moot. We have already detected signs of the subspace aliens' activity. It's why I brought you out here. We know they have their sights set on this place. We can find out their precise motivations once we have made contact."

He nodded slowly. "Alright, so what is it you need me to do, exactly?"

"We have located highly localized concentrations of inverted tetryons in this area."

"That shouldn't be possible outside of subspace."

She nodded quickly. "We believe that they have leaked into normal space and are a byproduct of spatial ruptures that have been created to allow the subspace aliens access into our space. We think we can force one of those ruptures to open and allow us to enter into their domain."

"And you need me for that?"

"I need *Eagle*. We have found a way to zero in on the tetryon concentrations and locate the gateway aperture of the ruptures but they are not stable. Like a wormhole, the aperture doesn't remain fixed at a point in space. We have had some success in wrangling it but to do so we need two energy sources to create enough power to attract the ruptures."

"Like a starship's warp core?"

She nodded. "Precisely. We've tried it with shuttles and even a runabout, but we haven't been able to generate enough raw power that way."

"So you just need *Eagle* for what? To be the bait?"

"Pretty much. *Eagle* can generate enough power to attract the rupture. We have been able to determine where the rupture's aperture is likely to manifest itself once it has been attracted. *Agamemnon* will be waiting for it and I'll have a team already prepared to enter the subspace fissure."

"And then what?"

"Then we make contact with the subspace aliens, find out their exact plans and stop them if necessary."

He couldn't help but look skeptical. "Just like that."

"You don't have to worry about the details. I'll handle that part."

He considered that for a moment. Jarik had promised him that he wouldn't be working the same way his father had done. He had touted transparency and openness in the way in which they would handle this latest threat. Amaya apparently didn't share the same philosophy. Or perhaps there was another issue in play here he didn't yet see. Perhaps it had something to do with his father's cryptic message that had kept him up at night as of late.

"All the same, I would like my science officer to go over your data first."

She clearly didn't like the sound of this. "We don't have time for that. You said it yourself, you have an away team back on Piquis. The quicker we get this done, the quicker you can return to pick up your crew. Besides, Jarik's instructions were quite clear. This is need-to-know only. The fewer people who are aware of this, the better."

"Are you telling me you didn't share this information with your crew? I find it hard to believe you've been able to get this far without involving them."

She hesitated for a moment. "I brought people into my confidence where I had to."

Same as he had done, he thought, considering the way he had shared pretty much everything he had learned with his own first officer. He had decided that he would draw a line in the sand. There was a limit on how far he was willing to go without understanding the full implications of what he had been asked to do. "You want my help, my condition is that I know at least as much as your crew. And I want my people – at the very least my science officer – to be read in as well. You can count on Commander Xylion's discretion, I'm sure."

He could see the battle that was being waged behind her steely gaze. Then she offered a small nod. "Fine, I arrange a briefing on *Agamemnon*," she said and turned for the exit. "Join us at zero-nine-hundred hours."

"Maya?"

She stopped short of the doors and turned to face him again.

He stood from his chair and rounded his desk. There had been a question he had been burning to ask her ever since the day she had

come to his quarters and had given him a message that had made him doubt everything. The very nature of that message made it almost impossible for him to talk to her about its content. And yet he knew he needed to.

She considered him expectantly when he didn't speak further.

"A few days ago you gave me a message from my father."

She nodded but he could tell that she was tensing up, her facial features becoming guarded all of a sudden.

"Did you listen to it?" he asked.

She frowned. "Of course not. It was meant for you, Michael. Why would I listen to it?"

"Do you have any idea why he gave it to you?"

"No, Michael, I don't. We both know he had his own ways of doing things. Maybe he wanted to make sure that you get it. Maybe he was concerned that it could get lost or intercepted over normal channels."

"That does sound like my father."

For a moment they just stared at each other, neither of them speaking and Michael wondered if she had lied to him. If she had, in fact, listened to the message herself. There had been a time, not so long ago, when he had been able to read her quite well, had been able to tell if she wasn't entirely forthright with him. Lately, she had been a complete mystery to him.

"Is there something else? We're burning daylight here, particularly since you are demanding a full briefing package," she said, sounding cold as ice.

He shook his head. "No. We'll be over in half an hour."

"Good," she said and then left his ready room with quick strides, once again not waiting for anyone to escort her back to the transporter room.

He uttered a sigh as he kept his eyes on those now closed doors. She had indeed been a mystery to him as of late. Except that he was now more certain than ever of at least one indisputable fact.

Amaya Donners was hiding something from him.

Elijah Katanga had been doing medical research long enough to understand the value of patience and yet he had never been very good at exhibiting that quality. He had earned a reputation not just for being stubborn, but also for being terrible at waiting for results.

He hadn't been able to stop himself from pacing the entire length of the medical lab, his eyes glancing back and forth between the chronometer displayed on one of the computer screens and the main doors.

He had every reason to be filled with nervous energy, he thought. After all, the next few minutes could determine if he had indeed found an antidote to a virus that had infected an increasingly large portion of the planet-wide population and whether they would be able to start saving lives, or if the death toll would continue to climb into the hundreds of thousands before a cure could be produced.

The doors finally parted and he immediately whipped toward the entrance to see DeMara Deen step into the lab. Like most non-Krellonians, she no longer wore an isolation suit since Katanga had been able to evidence with near total certainty that non-Krellonians lacked the biological makeup to be affected by the virus.

The Tenarian was carrying a tray containing three rows of medical pallets, each one, he knew, containing blood and tissue samples. She placed the tray onto a table.

"At last," he said and then quickly pulled on his surgical gloves before he picked up the first sample and sat down at a workstation. He slid the palette into a microscope and looked through the viewfinder. "These were just taken?"

She nodded as she took the workstation next to him to examine the next sample on the tray. "Yes, fifteen minutes ago. I took samples from all groups, including the control group."

"The virus is still present in sample A," said Katanga, trying hard to not let that discourage him.

"Same with sample B," said Deen after a moment.

Elijah reached for the next one and Deen took the one after that.

He quickly shook his head. "C is no good either," he said and moved on to the next, not waiting on Deen's report.

Together they checked every last sample until the truth became inescapable and left Elijah to utter a loud and heavy sigh as he pushed back in his chair. "It didn't work."

"I don't understand," said Deen, her own frustration lacing her words as she went back to the microscope to double-check their results. "The antiretroviral injections should have neutralized the cell coreceptors that are allowing the virus to replicate. Without the coreceptor, the virus should have no way to attach itself to healthy cells."

"If there is something I've learned in my time as a physician, it's that organisms find ways to propagate, especially when you're trying to stop them from doing that," he said, looking off in the distance. "Sometimes the only thing that makes us believe that we can stop nature from taking its course is our own arrogance."

Deen looked at the veteran doctor. "What are you suggesting? Are you saying we should just give up and let this virus kill its hosts?"

He quickly shook his head. "No, of course not. But clearly, we need to start from scratch. This is a dead end."

"I can't believe that. We had really promising results with our early trials."

Elijah still refused to make eye contact. "All those trials showed us is that there is a small percentage of Krellonians who have a genetic mutation that makes them resistant to the virus if their cells are properly stimulated. It's not the answer we were hoping for," he said and stood. "We still don't know enough about this damn virus and how it infected the first patient. We're still missing a crucial piece to the puzzle. It's like trying to plug a leak without knowing where the pipe is broken."

The doors to the laboratory opened to allow Tazla Star to step inside. Elijah picked up a nearby padd to continue to explore his thoughts on the matter, something he considered to be a much more valuable use of his time than acknowledging Star's visit.

"Any news on the antiretroviral treatment?" she asked.

"It didn't work," Deen said. "Doctor Katanga doesn't believe it's the answer we're looking for."

He could feel her quizzical eyes upon him but kept his focus on the padd.

"We've set up our operations here less than twenty-four hours ago. I suppose it was overly optimistic for us to expect to have a viable treatment option available this quickly. These things take time."

"And in the meantime, people die," he said without looking up. Star decided not to pursue the topic further. "What about our Outlander patients? Local security is eager for us to release them back into their custody. Do we think they'll be able to provide us with any kind of insights into this virus? If not, I really don't believe we can justify holding on to them any longer."

Deen spoke up again when Katanga clearly didn't have an opinion to share. "Their injuries have been attended to and they're well on their way to making full recoveries. We've also taken plenty of blood and tissue samples. I don't see a reason to keep them here."

"Sure, let's cut them loose just so those trigger-happy, so-called security forces can go and finish the job and shoot them all dead," Elijah said, his eyes still on the padd.

"I don't like it any more than you do, Eli, but we're not here to try and fix Krellonian social ills. Besides, what is the alternative? This is a hospital, not a prison. And I for one could do without having armed Krellonian guards running around the place."

He lowered the padd to look her in the eye for the first time since she had arrived. "They were executed in cold blood. Not a hundred meters from where we stand. That's barbaric and I will not be a party to those kinds of atrocities. Not if there is any way I can prevent them."

"I've been told that the responsible officer acted in violation of established protocols and will be held accountable for his actions. Chief Administrator Chella assured me personally that the Outlander prisoners will receive a fair trial once they've been handed over."

Elijah turned back to his reading. "I don't find that reassuring at all. Regardless, it's a moot point for now. I still need them for additional tests."

"What kind of tests?" Star wanted to know.

"I'll let you know once I've decided, Commander," he said and shot her a glance by looking up from the padd. "Anything else?"

Star remained rooted to the spot for a moment longer as she stared back at the doctor. She exchanged a quick look with Deen who simply shrugged before she turned around and quickly left the lab.

"I see the two of you are still getting along fabulously," said Deen once the doors had closed behind the Trill.

He simply grumbled in response.

"It's a shame, really. I know you two have been very close friends for a long time."

Elijah turned and looked at her, considering the winsome young Tenarian for a brief moment. "Sometimes it's the people closest to you who end up hurting you the most."

"I suppose that's true," she said, "but usually they don't do it on purpose."

"Dee, I believe you are an amazing person, I really do. I don't think I've ever met anyone more kind or caring or – for that matter – more stunningly attractive in my nearly ninety years in this universe. But there are matters I don't believe you can fully appreciate at your young age. For all of your great qualities, there are things you simply do not yet have the wisdom – which one can only obtain through good old-fashioned experience and worldliness – to really understand. You'll just have to accept that occasionally that lack of sagacity will be a handicap you won't be able to make up for with all your many other skills.

So please, forgive me if I don't feel like exploring my deeply-rooted and complicated issues with Tazla Star with somebody who has lived a life a mere fraction of the time I've been around. And it's not as if you would feel comfortable discussing your own recent troubles with our esteemed captain with me. Or am I wrong?"

Deen's wide-open and brilliant purple eyes simply stared back at Katanga, clearly having been caught entirely off guard by those words and now unable to find any of her own.

Fortunately for her, she didn't have to, since the lab doors opened yet again to allow another visitor to enter. This time, a uniformed, male Krellonian security officer. He wore a breathing mask to protect himself from potential containment and whereas Star had stridden into the lab confidently earlier, the Krellonian appeared downright uncertain about his intrusion.

Elijah shot the tall man with his Mohawk-style haircut that Krellonian military and security officers seemed to favor an annoyed glare. "What is it you want?"

The man looked at the doctor for a moment before his eyes slowly came to settle on Deen. "I ... uh ... need to arrange feeding the prisoners."

"Prisoners?" Elijah said sharply. "You mean my patients."

He nodded slowly. "The Outlanders, yes."

"And?"

He shot another awkward glance at Deen, even though his muscular physique, not to mention his chosen line of work, seemed to imply that this was not a man prone to the kind of shyness he was now displaying. "Right. The Lieutenant here has been assisting me with the arrangements."

Deen turned to look at the officer for the first time as if she had only now remembered. "Yes, of course. Aspirant Retrel, was it?"

He nodded quickly. "Orltu Retrel. Just ... uh ... Orltu is fine," he said and offered her a growing grin.

Deen smiled back. "Very well, Orltu. I'll meet you in five minutes by the replicators."

The young officer stayed in place for a moment longer than seemed appropriate, simply grinning at Deen, before he left the room again, without giving the doctor a second thought.

"My God, woman, do you have this kind of effect on all the men you meet?"

She seemed confused by that.

"Oh, don't give me that look," he said. "I didn't need a tricorder to know that his heartbeat was accelerated to a medically unsafe rate just by being in the same room with you."

Deen simply shrugged. "Some people respond to me more than others."

"It's that Tenarian Glow of yours. I would love to study that in more detail and in what ways exactly it affects others around you. Is it a biological effect? Is it purely psychological?"

She didn't appear fond of the idea, judging by the relatively cold look in her eyes. "I am about as eager for you to study me as you are discussing your personal relationships, Doctor."

He nodded. "Fair enough."

"I better get going. These Krellonians don't like to be kept waiting."

"Something tells me that young Aspirant Orltu wouldn't mind waiting for you until hell freezes over."

She regarded him with a disapproving look. "A much more likely scenario is that I'll be questioned once again as to when we will release the Outlander patients. And I'm running out of excuses. They're no longer buying my story that we'll need them to develop a potential cure for the pandemic," she said but was already heading for the doors.

"Maybe not a cure," Elijah said, almost to himself as a thought was beginning to form in his head.

Deen stopped to look at him.

"What have we been told about this virus?" he said. "How this entire epidemic got started in the first place?"

"That it was a purposeful act by a terrorist group. A biological attack," she said.

He snapped his fingers. "Exactly. By the Outlanders."

"Targeted specifically at Krellonians. If that is true, don't you think they've already tried every trick in the book to attempt and get that information from those they believe to be responsible? You've seen what they're capable of. I wouldn't be surprised if they haven't tortured people to death to get this information. What makes you think an Outlander would speak to you about this?"

"Simple," he said. "I'm not Krellonian. The problem is I can't get within two meters of an Outlander without one of those security goons sticking his nose in. Now, if I could get some alone time with one of our patients, maybe I could get some answers."

"I don't think I like where this is going."

## 8

As it turned out, DeMara Deen hadn't liked Elijah's plan at all. And yet she had begrudgingly agreed to go along with it.

All the Outlander patients, those who had raided the facility just the previous night and had all been wounded to some degree or

other by the Starfleet team trying to stop them, or, much more viciously, by the Krellonian security forces, were being kept in individual isolation rooms, carefully guarded by armed Krellonian officers.

One of those rooms allowed easy access via a side door that Elijah could use to slip inside and speak with the patient undisturbed, as long as the single officer standing guard by the main door would not pay attention to the room and the people inside.

That guard happened to be one Aspirant Orltu Retrel and by the time Elijah had unlocked the side door to gain access, sometime after dinner had been distributed to the patients, Retrel was deeply involved and eagerly participating in a conversation with DeMara Deen a few meters away from his normal post just outside the isolation room.

Elijah had no idea what it was that Deen was speaking to him about that had him entirely distracted from his duties, but he was certain that the subject of the conversation mattered little to the young officer, as long as he had an excuse to be in her company.

The patient was an amber-furred, lupine T'aq. Since the Krellonians had not been very forthcoming in sharing information about the composition of the Star Alliance, least of which details on the Outlander population, most of what Katanga knew about the T'aq had come from Culsten.

The lupine race originated from a planet about three light-years from Krellon Prime and had been conquered early on during the Krellonian period of military expansion and conquest. A formidable species in its own right, it had apparently taken decades and many bloody campaigns to fully subjugate this naturally aggressive race. Their athletic prowess, as well as their high level of intelligence, had quickly made the T'aq one of the most favored slave races within the Star Alliance and since their quasi-emancipation, they had also become the loudest voices demanding equal treatment within the Star Alliance.

As far as Eli understood matters, Outlanders had the same rights under the law as Krellonians, at least in theory, but in reality, were treated like second-class citizens. It was little surprise then that they had formed armed resistance groups and the T'aq, apparently, were often found among their leaders.

"Another test?" the T'aq named Hou said upon noticing Elijah stepping inside his room but without paying him much attention. He was lying down on top of his bed, wearing a medical gown that clearly hadn't been designed for his tall and lanky body, which to Eli looked like a cross between a full-grown human man and a timber wolf, complete with a fully fur-covered body, a broad and elongated snout and small ears standing up from the top of his skull.

"I thought perhaps we could have a conversation instead."

He directed his gray eyes towards Elijah. From his medical file, he knew that Hou was somewhere between twenty and twenty-five years, making him a fully grown, albeit young adult as far as his anatomy was concerned. Those eyes appraising him quietly, however, seemed to speak of a far older individual. "You wish to ... talk?"

Elijah nodded. "Yes, why not? I would like to learn more about you and your people. And I'm happy to share more about mine. I imagine you don't get to hear much about the galaxy outside the Star Alliance."

After a moment he glanced at the observation windows where he would likely have expected his guard to watch over him.

"Don't worry about the security officer. He's currently otherwise preoccupied."

Hou glanced back at Elijah. "What is it you want, Human?"

It was obvious that he suspected an ulterior motive. "You know why we're here?"

"To try and help the Krells," he said and turned away again, seemingly no longer interested in this conversation.

"I'm a doctor. My job is to help anyone who needs it. I don't care if they are Krellonian or T'aq or whatever. If somebody is sick, it is my duty to help them get better. It is a code that I and those like me live by. I treated your wounds just like I am treating those who have been affected by this virus."

"You have a code. So have I."

Elijah took a step closer to the bed. "And what's your code telling you to do?"

He said nothing, didn't even make eye contact again.

"Do you know anything about this virus, Hou?"

The corners of his mouth drew upward in what Elijah assumed was an approximation of a smile, except that his looked much more

menacing as he revealed razor-sharp teeth. "You wish to learn what I have learned?" He reached up with one arm, his four-fingered hand looking very much like a paw, and then pulled down his garment to reveal his chest.

Katanga had not treated Hou's wounds personally but had been told by his staff that some of the Outlander patients had shown signs of physical abuse that predated their most recent injuries. He could see that those reports had been somewhat understated. Entire swaths of his fur had peeled or burned away to lay bare relatively fresh scars where the skin underneath had been cut so deeply, deep and unnatural valleys had formed, crisscrossing his chest and in dire need of skin grafts. There was little that shocked Elijah anymore except perhaps the callous violence sentient people still insisted on perpetrating on each other. As a physician with decades worth of experience, his first thought, however, was to ensure those wounds would be seen to as soon as possible.

"What do you think you can do to me, Human, that has not already been done?"

Eli took an undeterred step closer. "First of all, I will ensure you get the medical care you require."

"I suppose you would like me to reward you for that care with information."

"No. I don't require a reward for practicing my craft. But I am asking, as one sapient creature to another, to help me find a way to cure this virus. For you to share whatever information you may have to allow me to do that."

Hou pulled the bed sheet over his battered body again and turned his head away once more. "And why would I want to do this? This virus is only killing the Krells. It was designed for that purpose. Why would I want to stop it?"

"Then you are confirming that this is an engineered virus? That it was spread by a biological attack?"

But Hou seemed to have no interest in speaking about this further.

"This pandemic, it's affecting every single Krellonian. Women, children, the elderly, those who probably have never harmed an Outlander in their life, or would think of doing so. I know enough about your society to know that not every Krellonian is an enemy of

your people. Can you truly be satisfied with unleashing a virus that has the potential of eradicating an entire race of people? Can you be callous enough to be party to genocide?" Elijah said, unable to keep the rising fire out of his voice.

"Perhaps it is divine retribution," he said coolly, keeping his head turned away. "Perhaps it is the Wolfmother's will to end the Krells for once and for all. To punish them for all the sins they and their forefathers have committed against the T'aq and the others. I won't stand in the way of celestial destiny."

The door to the isolation room opened suddenly and when Elijah looked up, he could see a rather unhappy Retrel standing in the doorway, one hand precariously resting on top of his holstered sidearm. "Doctor," he said, sounding noticeably aggravated. "You are not authorized to visit a prisoner unsupervised. I must ask you to step out of the room immediately."

Deen appeared at his side and placed a gentle hand on his arm, causing him to relax visibly. "That's quite alright, Orltu, I'm fairly certain that he didn't mean any harm and that he has finished with his examination of the patient. Aren't you, Doctor?"

Elijah looked at them both and then spared one last glance at Hou who refused to look at him any longer. "Yes, I suppose I'm done here," he said and headed for the doors where Orltu and Deen made room for him to step outside. "But we're not done with Hou's treatment. I'll have a team come by later to treat the rest of his injuries. I expect you to allow them full access so that they can do their jobs."

Deen stepped in again. "That shouldn't a problem, should it, Orltu?"

He swallowed before he spoke. "No, no of course not. As long as ... I can supervise their efforts."

"Just don't get in the way," Elijah barked and then shot one last, parting glance at the lupine in the room. When he showed no signs of interest at all, he left the room and then briskly walked down the corridor to leave the isolation ward.

Deen caught up with him after a few moments.

"That was a total waste of time," he said. "I won't be able to cut through centuries of mistreatment and growing resentment and

mistrust in one short conversation. I doubt even you, with all your charm, could accomplish that feat.”

“Probably not.”

Elijah stopped once they had left the ward to face the Tenarian. “And talking about charm, do you really have to be that friendly with the guard? The Krellonians are nothing more than cruel bullies in the worst possible way.”

Deen responded by crossing her arms in front of her chest defiantly. “You asked me to distract him and that’s what I did. You don’t get to criticize me for how I did it.”

“Right,” he said.

She relaxed slightly. “Besides, Orltu isn’t that bad. We had a very interesting conversation, he and I.”

“That’s nice. But do me a favor and don’t go and become best friends with the people trying to abuse and kill my patients,” he said and turned to walk away.

“That is hardly fair, Doctor,” she said after him. “Not when it appears I’ve been much more successful than you have.”

He turned around again to regard her with a quizzical expression. “Oh yes? How do you figure that?”

She took a step closer. “While your patient may not have been in a mood to talk to you, our eager aspirant was more than willing to open up to me. I learned quite a bit that could prove useful.”

“Such as?” he asked, sounding doubtful.

“For one, Orltu doesn’t believe that Hou is involved with the terrorist group behind the virus. So even if he had wanted to speak to you, he probably wouldn’t have been able to tell you anything useful.”

“Fantastic. But I don’t see how that helps us.”

“Well, maybe this will,” she said as she continued. “Orltu was among the security officers who came across the first patients infected by this virus. He can’t tell me where those patients are now but he could tell me exactly where they were found. I think he may have just given me ground zero of this pandemic.”

Elijah couldn't hide his surprise.

Deen’s smile widened. “You see, Doctor, I may be young and relatively inexperienced compared to you with your long and illustrious career and I may not have that same wisdom and world-

weariness you seem to be so proud of. But that doesn't mean I can't get results through other means. I suggest you keep that in mind the next time you require my help," she said and then turned to walk away, leaving Elijah to watch her stride off, not entirely able to keep a dumbfounded expression off his face.

## 9

The general interior design of the *Agamemnon* didn't differ a great deal from that of *Eagle* but since she was a slightly newer ship, the color palette was more subdued, with more beige, brown, and dark crimson instead of the prevailing gray tones, oranges, and blues that could be found throughout Michael's command. The design was also more streamlined, perhaps as a reflection of her more aerodynamically shaped outer hull that seemed to speak to speed, agility, and power.

Michael had always felt a little odd stepping onto a starship that wasn't his and perhaps this was true for most ship captains who had gotten used to the feeling of being in control – or at least, in command of their surroundings at most times. On the *Agamemnon*, however, he was merely a visitor, a guest with no authority over the men and women who crewed her and who looked upon another to lead them.

He didn't much care for that feeling and wondered how Amaya had made it look so effortless when she had come to visit *Eagle*, or perhaps, he now wondered, it had just been a front and she had been just as uncomfortable as he was now, which certainly would have helped to explain her recent attitude.

He dismissed those latter thoughts, fairly certain that there were other factors to explain her behavior than feeling ill at ease on another captain's ship.

Michael and Commander Xylion had been greeted in one of *Agamemnon's* transporter rooms by Maya's first officer, an efficient and affable Bolian by the name of Arden Texx, who had exchanged the usual pleasantries before escorting both of them to the ship's briefing lounge positioned behind the main bridge on the top of her saucer section.

Michael tried to not let it bother him that Amaya's briefing room was somewhat more spacious than his own.

She was already waiting for them along with a tall, dark, and broad-chested officer wearing a blue shirt under his uniform and whom she introduced as Wayne Daystrom, *Agamemnon's* chief science officer.

Michael didn't know Wayne personally but was naturally familiar with his famous grandfather, Richard Daystrom, who had been one of the foremost scientific minds of his generation and the inventor of the duotronic computer on which most modern computers were still based. If not a spitting image of his more famous forebearer, Wayne possessed the same large and imposing frame and while he seemed young to be the head of a science department on a ship of the line, Michael figured that if he had a mind just half as sharp as his grandfather's had been, he was probably more than qualified.

Amaya had taken her chair at the head of the conference table as was befitting for the ship's commanding officer and she spent little time on introductions, instead jumping right into the matter at hand. He thought she was doing a poor job of hiding her resentment at having to hold this meeting in the first place and at his insistence.

"Wayne, why don't you walk our guests through the plan to ensure they're confident with what we're proposing and alleviate any concerns of possible risks to either ship?"

Daystrom nodded and then did what science and engineering officers always tended to do throughout the fleet when called upon to demonstrate their latest findings or solutions. He stood from his chair and walked over to the large screen embedded into the wall to give his presentation with the aid of the computer. The young human did so with perhaps a little bit more noticeable enthusiasm than Michael was used to from his more seasoned and somber Vulcan science officer.

"Of course. We'll be using a similar method the crew of the *Enterprise* utilized seven years ago, channeling warp energy directly to the main deflector dish. This will allow us to locate a spatial rupture that we believe functions as a gateway to the subspace domain inhabited by the aliens," he said and activated the screen to show what appeared to be a scan of a spatial rupture. "However, the

location of the rupture is not fixed and will only remain stable for approximately one hour. After that, the rupture itself destabilizes again. We have been able to predict where the rupture will appear which has been consistently at roughly point six light-years relative to our position when we initiate the scan."

Michael shot a glance at Xylion, fully aware that he had already made the calculations.

"At warp nine point nine five, it would require one point three six hours to travel zero point six light-years," the Vulcan said without delay.

Amaya nodded. "We've tried this several different times but on every attempt, we were unable to reach the rupture before it had already destabilized again," she said with a look in her eyes that was clearly meant to impart that she had not reached out to him and *Eagle* on a whim.

He was still not convinced that it justified the abuse of a priority distress call. "If you have the approximate location of where the rupture will appear, why couldn't you just get a shuttle or runabout near those coordinates and just wait for it to show up?"

Amaya turned to Daystrom. "Wayne, would you mind taking that one?"

The young scientist hesitated for a moment, as if not knowing what to make of her tone before he turned back to the screen to activate a simulation. "We've attempted this as well," he said as another part of the screen began to display a computer graphic of the region of space shaped into a grid. A large Starfleet delta on the left-hand side of the screen represented *Agamemnon*. The delta lit up to indicate that the ship had started the process to scan for the rupture, which appeared shortly thereafter near the center of the screen and was represented by a red dot.

"This is what happens when we try to detect the anomaly. As I mentioned it will appear approximately point six light-years from our given position," he said and entered another command. This time a smaller Starfleet delta representing a support craft, took position near where the red dot had appeared. But on this occasion when *Agamemnon* initiated the scan again, the rupture reformed not where it had before but some additional distance away from *Agamemnon* and the support craft.

"It doesn't like to appear near a solid object as far as we can tell," said Maya.

"*Eagle* is a solid object," Michael said.

She once again referred to her science officer.

"Here is what happens if we invert the shuttle's warp field," he said and entered a few more commands. This time the dot appeared much closer to the shuttle. "In this next exercise, we inverted the warp field of the runabout which has a more powerful warp core." The dot appeared even closer to the smaller delta now. "It's still not close enough to reach it before it destabilizes, especially not with the limited speed of a shuttle or runabout, but we've been able to determine that the rupture distance directly corresponds to the power of the vessel's warp drive. Or more precisely, to the strength of the inverted warp field that the vessel is able to generate."

"Think of it like a magnet," said Maya. "The more powerful the magnet and the magnetic field it can produce, the higher the level of attraction, and the closer the rupture appears."

Wayne nodded along. "According to our calculations, the warp drive of a starship will be able to produce an inverted warp field powerful enough to attract the rupture to a distance close enough to allow us to reach it before it collapses."

"And once we do, then what?" Michael said, looking at his fellow starship captain. "Do you expect us to just walk into subspace and confront these aliens? How do we even know this rupture will take us where we need to go?" He realized that he had sounded slightly more confrontational than perhaps he had wanted to, but the truth was, he was growing increasingly irritated with the way Amaya was running this operation without so much as consulting him first. Perhaps he was even somewhat hurt that she had adopted such a single-minded approach.

She clearly didn't miss his prickly tone and responded in kind. "You won't have to worry about any of that," she said curtly. "In our plan, *Eagle* will be the ship to initiate the scan for the rupture and we will be in a position to approach the anomaly. I already have a team prepared to enter the rupture and make contact with the subspace aliens."

He considered her for a moment longer, but when she had nothing more to add, he instead turned back to his own science officer. "Commander, what are your thoughts on this plan so far?"

Xylion raised an eyebrow in typical Vulcan fashion before he responded, keeping his eyes on the screen that still ran Daystrom's most recent simulation. "I would need to study the data in more detail before I can form a definitive conclusion. Subspace anomalies are difficult to predict and often do not adhere to established astrophysical parameters."

Maya shook her head before he had even stopped talking. "We don't have the time for a second opinion on this," she said and looked at Michael. "We've already studied this phenomenon for the last few days and I'm not willing to waste any more time. We need to do this now. Besides, you said it yourself; you have your own mission and half your crew is stuck back on Piquis. The sooner we get this done, the sooner you can get back to that."

Michael had to acknowledge that she did make a decent point, certainly regarding his concerns about leaving Star and her team practically stranded on a Krellonian colony. Maya seemed to be determined that *Eagle* was to do little more than play the role of a glorified lighthouse, showing *Agamemnon* the way to where they needed to go, meaning that all of the risks were Amaya's to shoulder. And who was he to tell her what risks she should and shouldn't take with her own ship and crew? Still, it bothered him. "I don't think this a good idea," he said but then continued when he noticed her growing frown. "But I understand the urgency and accept that this is a risk worth taking."

"Excellent," she said and quickly stood, clearly eager to get underway after the time already lost explaining her plan. "Wayne will let you know everything you need to know to make the necessary modifications to your ship. As soon as you are back on *Eagle*, we'll set course for the location we believe the rupture will appear. You should be able to get started in ... what?" she said, glancing briefly at Daystrom. "Four hours?"

He nodded.

"We'll head your way as soon as the rupture has appeared," Michael said.

“There's really no point. By the time you reach us, the rupture will already have closed and we'll be back in normal space. We'll have to work on a strict timeline.”

He decided to stick to his guns. “Nevertheless, I'd be more comfortable if you have some backup even if we won't get there in time. Just in case something does go wrong.”

Amaya clearly didn't want to spend time arguing the point and simply offered a short nod. She turned to her first officer who had not spoken throughout the meeting. “Arden, make sure you escort our guests back to the transporter room as soon as they are done here.”

“Will do.”

She offered one last glance at Michael and Xylion, exchanging nothing more than curt nods before she quickly left the room and by doing so removed any chance for him to try and speak to her further about this plan or anything else for that matter.

## 10

Most people who had crossed paths with Doctor Elijah Katanga over his long and illustrious medical career had come to learn that not much was able to come between him and a task he had set himself and that it was usually easier for everyone involved to either stand beside him or just get out of the way altogether. It was a lesson the crew of *Eagle* had learned pretty quickly after he had come aboard.

So when Elijah was barreling down the hallway of the field hospital, making a beeline for the administrative office, Nora Laas, who was standing guard outside the doors and who, by all accounts, was a person not afraid of facing any foe, quickly stepped aside when the physician didn't even slow his approach.

Elijah had not stopped to consider why the security chief was guarding the small administrative section of the facility and had been too preoccupied to even notice the trio of Krellonian security guards that had been with her.

Instead, he stepped right through the parting doors with the singular mission of confronting Tazla Star and getting her to approve what needed to be done.

“Ah, Doctor Katanga, just in time,” said the Trill first officer when she spotted him entering the room, doing an admirable job of hiding her irritation at the way he had barged inside.

Elijah paused for a moment, confused by her surprisingly accommodating tone, one he hadn't expected considering the heated nature of their latest encounters. It was only then that he took stock of the other person in the room.

Chief Administrator Chella, wearing a breathing mask, stood to one side, apparently having arrived for another round of inspections.

“We were just discussing the progress you have made in identifying the nature of the virus,” Star said.

“Or rather the lack of it,” said Chella, sounding noticeably displeased, that as far as Elijah was concerned, was her default demeanor, since he had never observed the woman with anything else but a frown etched into her serious features.

“We have made more progress in isolating and identifying the active retrovirus attacking the Krellonian immune system in two days than your physicians have done in two weeks.”

Chella's frown only deepened. Whereas Elijah would have considered such news a positive development, the Krellonian leader seemed to take offense to his brazen tone.

Star, ever playing the part of the diplomat – which was curious in itself, since he vividly recalled that her previous host and his good friend Dezwin, had been anything but – quickly put on a smile.

“What the good doctor is trying to say,” she said and threw him a quick, warning glance, before turning back towards Chella, “albeit rather clumsily, is that it takes time to find a cure for such a viral disease, but that we are pursuing several promising avenues.”

Elijah had no idea when exactly she had turned from a plain truth-speaker to somebody trying to twist and embellish reality to present it in a more favorable light. It hadn't been after Dezwin had been joined with Star, that much he was sure of. That only left the possibility that it had to have been Tazla's ambitions that had steered Star into this direction. For all his medical knowledge and experience, he wasn't an expert in Trill psychology and how multiple joinings over the centuries, with the symbiont moving from one host to the next, each time merging with a new individual, affected the new person this fusion inevitably created. He knew, however, that he was

beginning to resent this latest iteration of Star. "At the moment there really is just one avenue I am interested in," he said.

Star gave him a surprised look, clearly not happy with the contradiction, nor, apparently knowing exactly where he was going with it, and probably having hoped he'd voice such thoughts in private with her first.

That was too bad, as far as he was concerned. He needed to move on this now.

"And what would that be?" Chella asked.

"We need to identify where this virus first originated and who the first patients were."

She shook her head. "The first victims of this attack are already dead, Doctor."

"I'll need to carry out extensive autopsies on their bodies. But in the meantime, I need access to the Paradise Quarter in the city."

"What for?" Chella said.

"I have it on good authority that it might be the epicenter of this disease."

But the administrator shook her head. "Out of the question. I will not allow alien visitors to mingle with our people. I made that very clear from the start. Besides, there is nothing to find in the Paradise District. It's a rundown slum filled with abandoned buildings and a few dilapidated tenements occupied by Outlander low-lives. It's the last place these terrorists would have released their weapon. Krellonians do not tend to frequent that area."

"Be that as it may," he said, not willing to back down, now that he had an angle to pursue. "I'll still need to investigate the area. If it is as abandoned as you say, there won't be much chance of us disturbing the natives."

Star frowned at his choice of words.

Chella didn't like it either. "This is a line I am not willing to cross. And that is my final decision on this matter. If you feel that there might be something in the Paradise Quarter that could help you, I'm willing to send some of my security people to investigate if you tell me what they should look for."

"It's not going to work that way," he said, shaking his head in frustration. "I won't know what I'm looking for until I see it. I'm the one who will need to go."

Chella glanced at Star in exasperation, trying to prompt her to talk some sense into her subordinate.

But before either of them could respond, the door of the room opened and Aspirant Retrel stepped inside. "Apologies for the disruption, Chief Administrator, but you have an emergency call."

Chella reacted immediately, like an official who had gotten quite efficient in dealing with ongoing crises over the last few weeks. "Excuse me," she said and promptly followed the aspirant out of the room.

"Very nice, Eli," Star said in a mocking tone as soon as the doors had closed behind her. "Really, well done. Why don't you try to insult her some more while you're at it? I can't see how it could possibly hurt our efforts at this point."

"Spare me the sarcasm, it doesn't suit you at all."

"It seems I haven't got much else left," she said, shooting back.

"I don't know, looks to me you have plenty of smiles and pretty words to offer to the pigheaded administrator."

"It's called tact. You might want to try it sometime."

He just turned his back to her. "I'll have plenty of tact once this crisis is over. For now, I need plain and simple action. Not dancing around the issues at hand and desperately trying to make friends in high places."

She took a step towards him. "That's what you don't get, Eli. No one can deny that you're a brilliant physician. Dez would never have admitted it, but even he knew that you were more talented than he ever was. But you can't solve every problem with a direct approach. Sometimes you have to grease the wheel a little bit to get what you need."

"Well, I'll leave the wheeling and dealing to you, you seem to have gotten quite adept at it. I'll focus on trying to save this planet."

She uttered an exasperated sigh. "You're not making that part easy on me. Now, what's this talk about the Paradise Quarter?"

He turned back to face her. "You can thank our lovely DeMara and her inexplicably powerful charms for that information. According to some members of the Krellonian security forces, that's where the first victims came from. I need to see for myself."

"If Chella is right about that place, it doesn't sound like it makes sense as the target of a biological attack."

“At the moment, I don’t care what may or may not make sense. It’s a lead and we need to follow it.”

Star determinedly shook her head. “We’re not going to disregard directives from Krellonian authorities while we’re playing in their backyard. I could try to get in touch with Councilor Yorlo and see if he can put some pressure on her, but I don’t like the idea of what that could mean for our relationship with her. We’ll still need to work with Administrator Chella here on the ground.”

Eli groaned inwardly as Star yet again expressed her concerns about the political implications of their actions instead of focusing on what was truly important. “Yorlo is not exactly expedient. The last time we tried to get something done through him we were sitting on our backsides for days. We don’t have the time for this.”

The doors opened once more and Chella reemerged. Elijah quickly realized that frowning was apparently not the only expression in her repertoire. The Krellonian woman looked positively distraught. Close to tears, in fact. “It’s my daughter. They found her collapsed in our home. She’s got the plague.”

Star, to her credit, immediately sprang into action. “Let’s have her beamed directly to this facility,” she said and then looked at him. “Get an examination room prepped for an incoming patient.”

Elijah didn’t hesitate either this time and quickly stepped out, beating both Star and Chella to it, to lead the team examining this latest patient himself.

Less than two minutes later, Chella's daughter had materialized in one of the hospital's examination rooms. Elijah guessed her age to be between twelve and fourteen and of average size and build for an adolescent Krellonian girl. Her face was already paler than it had any right to be and she was unconscious.

Not a moment after she had materialized, her upset mother barged into the room. “Yira, no. Please, no. I told you, I told you to stay at home. To be careful. How is this possible?” she cried, verging between anger, frustration, and fear.

DeMara Deen was on hand before Elijah had to say it and the Tenarian gently reached out to the woman. “Administrator, please, let the doctor and his team do their jobs. We’ll be able to observe from outside the room and stay out of their way as they help your daughter.”

Chella made eye contact with Deen and her calm demeanor seemed to rub off on her as she was being gently guided out of the room, even if her increasingly wet eyes darted back to the form of her unconscious daughter on the biobed.

Elijah and his team worked on their newest patient for twenty minutes, first confirming what they were up against – it was, without doubt, yet another case of the Piquis Plague – then using various proven methods to stabilize her fluctuating bio readings before trying to apply some of the treatments THAT had shown success in slowing the spread of the retrovirus to the victim's immune system.

When he emerged from the room again, Chella was waiting for him, along with Tazla Star.

"She is late stage two," he said in that tone that doctors used when breaking bad news to their patients' loved ones. "We've stabilized her for now."

Chella seemed shaken with disbelief. "Stage two? That's not possible. She has shown no symptoms at all. No signs that she had even been infected."

"The symptoms are all there. The best I can guess is that she has been hiding them very well," he said and didn't add his second best guess, which was that Chella had simply not noticed them.

The pained look in her eyes seemed to confirm that it was probably the more accurate hypothesis and that the chief administrator had been so busy with the unfolding medical crisis on her world, that she had not had the time to take note of the deteriorating condition of her own daughter.

"I ..." she started but the rest of the words died in her throat. "Can I see her?"

He nodded. "She is conscious but weak. You can talk to her for a few minutes."

Chella turned for the treatment room.

"Administrator, there's still the matter of –" Elijah stopped when he felt a hand around his arm. He turned to see that it belonged to Star who gave him a persistent look, shaking her head slightly.

When he looked back at Chella, he realized that she hadn't even noticed him speak and had instead continued into the room to be with her daughter.

This time Eli relented. But as Star let go of him and he left the examination ward, he was more determined than ever that he was not going to give up on the task ahead of him. After all, and as most people who knew him were very much aware, little could stand in his way to deter him once he had set himself one.

## 11

*“Doctor Katanga has some ideas on what needs to be done to find a cure for this epidemic. Let’s just say they are not exactly orthodox and the local authorities here are not overly impressed with his suggestions.”*

Michael nodded, having known the stubborn physician long enough to be able to picture exactly what Star was reporting. “I trust you have things in hand.”

To this, she uttered a sigh.

“That bad?”

*“The good doctor has been more difficult than usual as of late,”* she said as her picture monetarily dropped out from his screen due to interference, only to be quickly replaced again.

“I had noticed,” he said, not having missed the unusual animosity between his XO and chief medical officer. He had his suspicions as to the nature of their disagreement but had not pried into the matter.

*“I will handle it,”* she said, sounding much more resolute and dispelling any concerns that her quarrels with her longtime friend and colleague would endanger the mission.

Truthfully Michael had none. It had been a long journey – for both of them – but he had learned to trust Tazla Star’s instincts and abilities to overcome the challenges she faced. “I’m certain that you do.”

She offered a small bob of her head to acknowledge his confidence in her before she moved on. *“I’m also glad to report that our other personnel issue is starting to make progress.”*

“Oh?”

*“The officer we were discussing previously and who has raised some motivational concerns in the latest performance evaluations has started to*

*show some actual interest in performing her duties in the manner we would expect her to. It's too early to say if it will show any results but it is a good first step."*

He needed no further reminder of what Star was talking about. Her long background in the clandestine intelligence community had made it easy for her to talk about something of significance without making it appear important to anyone possibly listening in to their conversation. The channel was encrypted as to standard procedures, of course, but that alone didn't guarantee their privacy, especially not since she was transmitting from a planet ruled by a xenophobic government, which as far as they knew, could have been plotting with an alien race to invade the Federation.

"Glad to hear it. Keep a close eye on the situation. I expect all my officers to perform their duties to the best of their abilities, but in this particular case, I appreciate that there are mitigating circumstances to consider."

She nodded. *"I understand,"* she said. *"And I will be available to offer my full support where necessary."*

"It is in our best interest that this officer moves past her recent issues and shows some initiative soon. But let's not yet force the issue."

Star smirked. *"I'll be gentle."*

He nodded.

*"How about your situation?"* she asked. *"Is the Agamemnon all right?"*

Michael uttered a little sigh. Mindful that this transmission could be intercepted, he couldn't just come out and say what was really on his mind or offer any details on why *Eagle* had returned to the Diaspora under pretenses. "Her situation is currently stable. However, they will require some additional assistance before we can return. Working with Captain Donners hasn't been as smooth as I would like."

Star seemed to appreciate his ongoing frustration with the greater issues at play and only the two of them understood at present. Or rather, didn't. At least not fully. *"We should be fine fending for ourselves for a while longer. We had a small incident with looters yesterday and a rather overzealous and disproportionate response by the local security forces but we've been able to contain the situation."*

Michael perked up. "Any casualties?"

She shook her head. *"Not on our side. But some of the looters were killed by the security forces. Administrator Chella has assured me that she's looking into the matter but I'm not holding my breath. Civil liberties don't appear to be priorities in Krellonian society. Not where certain segments of the population are concerned."*

"Just be careful and don't get involved in internal politics, no matter how tempting. Our mission focus must remain on providing medical assistance and trying to find a way to cure that disease. That's how we spread goodwill and perhaps improve relationships in the long term."

*"You don't have to tell me, sir. And I think, for the most part, our people understand this. With a few minor exceptions. But I'll handle those."*

He had a pretty good idea whom she was referring to.

*"Our relationship with Administrator Chella has improved since her daughter has unexpectedly fallen sick and we have taken her in as a patient. We're hopeful that the disease hasn't spread so far that she cannot still be saved. Once we find a cure, that is."*

Michael frowned as he noticed her image on his computer screen beginning to distort with static. It hadn't been stable from the start, mostly thanks to the suboptimal conditions for subspace communications inside the Amargosa Diaspora and the heavy electromagnetic radiation prevalent within due to the high concentration of stars in the cluster.

"We're about to lose the real-time uplink," he said, expecting the connection to terminate shortly. "I have every confidence that you'll stay on top of the situation on the ground, considering the challenging circumstances. I'll try to contact you again within twenty-four hours."

He could just about see Tazla Star nodding but her words were too heavily distorted to make out clearly before she cut out completely.

Michael leaned back in his chair, considering the screen of his computer console that once again only displayed the blue and silver seal of the Federation. He hated the feeling of being so far removed from his own people, for all intents and purposes, stranded on an alien world. But he also knew that at least for now, Star and her people were on their own while he dealt with a potentially far larger

concern. He hadn't been disingenuous when he had said that he trusted Star and her team on Piquis to be able to handle whatever came their way. He just wished he had the same confidence about what Amaya Donners was up to while they were meddling with forces beyond regular time and space.

## 12

Lif Culsten hated being on Piquis. He hated being sequestered in the runabout to reduce the chance of being infected by the patients in the temporary medical facility he had helped set up just next door, he hated the cold and windy climate that made it downright hazardous to step outside during certain times of the day, and he hated being surrounded by the small-mindedness of his own people who looked upon any stranger with guarded suspicion and treated the Outlanders, the very people they had once enslaved, still little better than second-class citizens even after so-called reforms and equal rights.

He also hated the fact that *Eagle* had come to this world for apparently no other reason than because his own uncle had pulled the necessary strings to get him – not a Starfleet ship, or urgently needed medical assistance – but really only just him, all the way out to this planet.

The pandemic that was raging across this small colony world was a terrible disaster, of course, and *Eagle* was well equipped to deal with such a calamity, especially since Doctor Katanga was a specialist not just in virology but also, as he had already proven, in quickly setting up a medical operation on planets far removed from the Federation. But the fact that he served on *Eagle* was nothing more than a lucky accident and if not for Lif, it could really have been any Starfleet ship that could have been dispatched to try and solve this crisis.

He wasn't sure what had been more depressing, the fact that this virus was killing hundreds of Krellonians, or the fact that his uncle had used this disaster as a pretense to get him to Piquis and find out what his estranged wife was up to.

Lif was particularly unhappy that he had been asked to stay behind on this planet after *Eagle* had left to answer *Agamemnon's* distress signal when he had made it clear that he had no interest whatsoever to get involved in the personal or, more likely, the political squabbles within his own family.

And yet everybody around him had appeared to have an opinion on it, starting with the captain who had made it clear, for reasons that still mystified him, that he should take his uncle up on his request. He had stopped short of ordering his compliance but it was obvious that Star expected him to fall in line, simply by the tone in her voice and the way she looked at him every time she checked up on him, which he had found had become far more frequently than he would have liked.

Louise's feelings on the matter were equally apparent, especially since the incident of the Outlanders being executed by security forces practically right in front of their eyes. She had been colder and more distant since they had returned from shore leave where she had not only discovered about the poor treatment of Outlanders on the homeworld but also about his refusal to get involved with this highly divisive and political issue.

It hadn't stopped there. Following the most recent incident, he had been able to see a change in the way many of his friends and colleagues regarded him as if they couldn't understand how he could have so much in common with a people who considered civil rights an inconvenient afterthought.

So he had finally given in. He didn't expect that it would make much of an impact, but he understood that he needed to be seen to at least try and make a difference and so, after long contemplation, he had reached out to Star to let her know that he was ready to try and meet with Garla.

Chief Administrator Chella, who as it quickly became apparent, was aware of Garla's presence on Piquis and not at all a big fan of a Sentinel of the Eye operating on her turf with impunity, did however allow for Lif to travel to the nearby capital city as long as he went as a civilian, left his Starfleet uniform behind and was not accompanied by any non-Krellonian offworlders.

Approval was further expedited by the fact that Chella had pretty much started living at the medical facility since her daughter had been admitted.

Just a few hours after Lif had approached Star with his decision, he materialized in the central transporter station near the core of Piquis City and just a few blocks away from where he had been told he'd be able to find his aunt.

The weather was milder and much less blustery in the city thanks perhaps to the cluster of high-rise buildings at its center, and while it was by no means Risa, he had little difficulty navigating the unfamiliar city, which in essence resembled many other medium-sized Krellonian population centers throughout the Star Alliance.

The Eye kept its local headquarters in an indistinct high-rise building with markings and signage that gave no indication of its true purpose.

It wasn't until he stepped into the foyer of the building that he realized that he was probably in the right place since the area was dominated by heavily armed security personnel.

A delicate Kridrip Outlander with long braided hair and large eyes seemed to spot him immediately after he had stepped inside. "Liftu?"

He flinched slightly by the way he pronounced his name. "Yes."  
"I am Tenn. Sentinel Garla is expecting you."

His surprise lasted only a mere heartbeat. It seemed a foregone conclusion that a person who made her living as a spymaster would have already been expecting him. "Lead the way," he said. The fact that Garla had Outlanders working for her gave him hope that she was not as bigoted as the general Krellonian population, particularly on a provincial colony world such as Piquis. The truth was that although he and Garla had been very close when he had grown up, it hadn't been until his late adolescence that he had even become consciously aware of the pervasive intolerance among his people, including among his friends and family. Garla had always seemed somehow above petty racism and discrimination but he had to admit that he didn't really know her personal politics.

Tenn led him towards an elevator, the three armed men guarding it, stepping aside wordlessly, and once inside he waved his fingers in front of a console, causing it to speed up the tall building.

“Do many Outlanders work here?” he said as they stood in silence while the lift was speeding to its destination.

Tenn simply turned his large yellow eyes towards him, regarding him for a few moments but didn't respond making Lif wonder if he had perhaps offended him. If he had, his facial expressions, which remained cool and neutral didn't reveal it.

The lift arrived before the silence between them threatened to become awkward. “This way,” he said as the doors opened and he stepped out of the elevator.

Lif understood that her role as a Sentinel – a position for which there wasn't any comparable role within Starfleet or even the Federation that he was aware of – gave Garla a great level of resources and autonomy to pursue projects she considered significant for the good of the Star Alliance. As such he had expected Tenn to escort him into a large office for someone befitting her importance. He was surprised when he was led into a holodeck instead.

A very good one as it turned out and certainly much more advanced than the early versions he had encountered before he had left for the Federation.

They stepped into a very faithful representation of what he believed to be the Great Rivers Lowlands, an expansive area of mostly untouched wildland where three of the largest rivers on Krellon merged and dropped into a massive waterfall.

Great Rivers was just a few kilometers to the south of where Lif had spent much of his childhood and as far as he knew was also where Garla had been born.

They found her standing on a natural overlook that offered a spectacular view of the cascade. As far as he could see, the three of them were the only people for kilometers.

Lif marveled once more at how well his aunt had aged over the years as she still looked almost exactly the way he had remembered her from his childhood, with the same short, dark haircut, a tall frame, and a trim and athletic body, well-defined in a brown and gray formfitting suit that was more uniform than business suit and seemed to imply that she was ready for action. Her age-defying appearance seemed unsurprising since he remembered her always having been very athletic.

"I was wondering when you would finally come to visit," she said with a beaming smile that revealed rows of white teeth. "You've been on Piquis for two days now and I haven't even heard a peep until now."

"I was not aware you'd be here," he said, only half-lying. He had certainly not expected to run into her on this backwater world. Not until Yorlo's unexpected visit.

Her always-appraising eyes revealed that she didn't fully buy it. "Thank you, Tenn," she said to her assistant. "That will be all for now."

He nodded deeply and then, without gracing Lif with another glance, he quickly departed the holodeck.

Lif walked closer to the edge of the outlook. It only now occurred to him that the usually ear-splitting rush of the waterfall below had been muted significantly, likely to allow for conversation. "I always liked this spot."

She nodded. "We could arrange a trip to the real thing."

He quickly shook his head. "That's a couple of weeks round trip from here," he said. "I can't leave for that long."

"I suppose not. Besides, you've only just been back to Krellon — what has it been? Three weeks ago? Did you get a chance to come here then?"

"We didn't have the time to take in all the sights," he said, keeping his eyes on the majestic waterfall.

"And I remember you brought a companion along. How is your friend the engineer? You seemed quite fond of Lieutenant Hopkins."

He turned to face her, frowning slightly. It bothered him that she recalled her name with such ease after only meeting her once, and even then, only briefly.

"Don't give me that look," she said. "It is my job to know these things."

"Of course, it is."

"Why don't you tell me a little bit more about you instead?" she said as she walked over to a tree stump and took a seat. "We didn't get much of a chance to speak the last time."

“All you wanted to talk about was the supposedly great work you were involved in and how I could help you with making it a success, but you never really told me what it was about.”

“Why? Have you changed your mind about my offer?”

He hesitated. If his purpose of coming here had been to learn more about her work, as his uncle had asked him to do then it made sense for him to pretend that he was interested. But he knew that Garla would see through his ruse almost instantly.

“Or have you come here because my misguided husband is desperate to learn my secrets?”

His eyes betrayed his surprise for a moment. He knew she was good at reading people, he hadn't expected her to know the exact nature of his conversation with Yorlo.

She smirked. “Please. What kind of Sentinel would I be if I didn't know about the comings and goings of influential council members and their meetings onboard foreign starships?”

“I am not interested in whatever is going on between you and Yorlo. As far as I'm concerned that is between the two of you.”

“If it were only that simple,” she said as she momentarily glanced past him and toward the waterfall. “So tell me then, my dear nephew, what is it that has you interested? That made you come to see me after you had sworn off dealing with any of your own kind ever again.”

His frown deepened, not appreciating her psychoanalysis. “I didn't come back here by choice. I'm a Starfleet officer and I go where they send me.”

“Yes,” she said, not quite able to keep the suspicion out of her voice. “And they've sent you all the way out here. To a meaningless rock in the middle of nowhere.”

“On which a serious pandemic has taken hold among the populace.”

She nodded. “That is tragic. But I can't imagine that it is the Piquis Plague that has brought you to see me. I'm no physician and last time I checked neither are you.”

Lif took a moment to let his eyes wander across the lush landscape of hills and mountains, and thick forests and blue rivers before he settled back onto Garla. “I came here because I am sick to death of how my so-called people treat everyone who is just a little

bit different than they are. With their total lack of respect, decency, and compassion for other beings. I am ashamed and disgusted that after all those decades since we have subjugated and enslaved half a dozen races, we still haven't been able to come to grips with the horrible things we have done and continue to allow ourselves to wallow in our own ignorance and narrow-mindedness as if history never happened."

Garla's smile had disappeared as she stood to look directly at her nephew, standing nearly face-to-face with him. "If that is how you truly feel, Lif, then you have come exactly to the right place."

"How is that?"

"Because I agree with everything you just said. And what is more, I have the cure to not just what has been ailing you, but to the cancer that has plagued the entire Star Alliance for centuries. I know how to fix everything."

## Part Four: Charybdis

### 1

"Sir, we have reached our target position," Ensign Srena, the Andorian helmsman reported as she turned to look at the captain sitting in his chair behind her.

"Very good. Come to a full stop."

"Full stop, aye sir," she said as she faced her station again to execute the order.

Michael could feel the ship slowing and within moments Srena reported that they had come to a standstill. He stood from the captain's chair and walked up the slight incline and toward the back of the bridge where Xylion sat at the aft science station.

"Commander, are we ready to scan for the anomaly?"

The Vulcan offered a minuscule nod as he worked his instruments. "We have received the exact specifications from *Agamemnon* and engineering reports that we are ready to channel warp energy through the main deflector," he said. "According to Lieutenant Daystrom, this will cause the subspace rupture to appear approximately point six light-years from our position."

"And close to *Agamemnon's* current coordinates?"

"Once they invert their warp field, her energy signature should theoretically attract the rupture to appear close to their location," said the Vulcan.

Hearing it all for the second time didn't change the fact that he still didn't much care for this plan. He turned back to face the front of the bridge before he glanced at Leva at tactical. "Commander, hail the *Agamemnon*, please."

The tactical officer activated the required panels on his board and Amaya Donners promptly appeared, larger than life, on the main view screen. "*Are you ready to initiate the scan?*" she said without preamble.

Michael nodded but wasn't quite able to keep a frown off his face. "Yes. Are you still planning on entering the anomaly once it appears?"

*"We've already covered this. I will lead a team into subspace as soon as we have made contact with the rupture."*

His eyes opened a little wider in surprise. He had known that she had planned to send a team, but she had not told him that she was planning on leading it herself, which seemed a clear violation of standard protocol on commanding officers partaking in potentially dangerous away missions. He knew that Amaya had always been a very hands-on starship captain, preferring to lead from the front rather than watching others take the risks instead, and while he thought this was admirable in theory, he also understood that there were good reasons for protocols like these. "You are planning to go yourself?"

*"Michael, we don't have the time to go through all the details. Yes, I'll be leading the mission since I have the greatest amount of knowledge about what we might be facing in subspace. It makes the most sense,"* she said, indicating that she may have briefed her crew about some of the details about their mission, but apparently, and as to Jarik's instruction, had kept some of them to herself.

He could tell that there was little point in trying to talk her out of it. "And how do you actually plan to accomplish this?" he said, ignoring her increasing impatience. She needed him and *Eagle* to do what she had planned, the least she could do was answer his questions first, he argued. "Taking a stroll into a subspace domain isn't exactly standard procedure."

*"Rest assured we're well prepared,"* she said. *"We will be using specially modified personal shields that will protect the away team from the environment we expect to encounter long enough to fulfill our mission. Now, if you don't mind, we are on a bit of a schedule here."*

He nodded slowly and turned back to his science officer. "Commander, initiate the sequence."

"Initiating the main deflector now," he said as his fingers danced over the console.

On the main screen, Maya's lips curled up into a little smile. *"We've got it. Just where we thought it would show up. Well done, Eagle. We should be able to get in range in just a few minutes and –"*

*"Sir, the rupture is destabilizing,"* said Xylion.

Amaya's smile disappeared. *"That shouldn't be happening."*

“At the present rate it will disperse before the *Agamemnon* will be able to make contact,” the Vulcan said.

She shot Michael a sharp look across the screen. “*You’ve made an error in your calculations.*”

He walked over to Xylion to look over his shoulder even if much of what his screens displayed was beyond his much more elementary grasp of subspace science. “Is it possible?”

Xylion reviewed his data at a speed that threatened to give him a headache and then looked up. “No mistakes, Captain. The calculations are exactly as provided by Lieutenant Daystrom.”

“*Obviously, they are not,*” she said from the main view screen. “*If they had been, the anomaly wouldn’t have destabilized so quickly.*”

Michael whirled back around, trying to keep his anger in check. Her recent attitude was beginning to test his patience, more so now that she found it so easy to blame them for the failure of her own plan. “We’ve done exactly as you’ve asked, Maya. If there is an error, it’s not on our side.”

The two starship captains glared at each other for a moment and Michael wondered once again at what point they had become so adversarial towards each other. She backed off first. “*Fine. Still, to be sure, I recommend you carry out a level three diagnostic of all the relevant systems including the main deflector. And send us all your data on the attempt and we will review the calculations and make any amends as necessary.*”

He nodded slowly but said nothing.

“*Let’s try this again once we know what went wrong, Donners out.*” And with that, her face blinked out from the screen.

Michael looked back at his science officer. “Let’s do as she says and send her everything, including the outcome of the diagnostics.”

“Yes, sir.”

“*Bensu to Captain Owens.*”

Michael looked up upon hearing the unexpected voice and then exchanged a puzzled look with Xylion. It wasn’t often that he heard from his bartender, in fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he had commed him directly. Judging from Xylion’s raised brow, he too had not expected this.

“Yes, Mister Bensu, how can I help you?”

“*Sir, I was wondering if I could come to see you on the bridge.*”

That too was rather peculiar for a civilian who had never shown any signs of interest in starship operations. "This isn't exactly the best time, Mister Benu."

He seemed undeterred. *"I think it might be important. And ... well, I'm already in the turbolift."*

He glanced over to the closed doors of the lift just to his right. "Very well," he said, having to admit that he was at least somewhat curious why the enigmatic bartender had chosen this precise moment to get in touch.

No sooner had his words come over his lips, the doors to the lift hissed open and Benu stepped out. Clearly, he had not only been in the lift already, he had been right behind those closed doors.

Benu took a couple of gingerly steps onto the bridge, taking in these unfamiliar surroundings before he spotted the captain and walked toward him.

Michael once again took note that Benu was still a mystery to him in more ways than one. He knew next to nothing about the man's background, couldn't even place his species, knowing only that he had never encountered it before. All he knew for certain was that he and Xylion were close friends. It was the only reason why he had allowed his request to join the crew and why he had agreed to this unorthodox visit.

Xylion for his part stood from his chair. "This is highly irregular," he said.

"I know," Benu said and nodded and then looked at the captain. "And I apologize for the timing of my request, Captain."

"You mentioned that it was important," he said, unable to imagine what could possibly be so significant that he needed to speak to him right this moment.

Benu looked at the main screen as if he could see more than the ubiquitous and colorful backdrop of the globular cluster that was the Amargosa Diaspora there. "I ... I believe you're trying to open a rupture into subspace," he said.

Michael couldn't hide his surprise at this statement and his first thought as to how he could be aware of this was a seemingly unlikely proposition.

Bensu seemed to sense this. "No, Xylion has not been sharing any details about our current mission with me," he said. "Far from it."

Michael searched the Vulcan's face for some confirmation of this but Xylion's expression remained unreadable while he kept his eyes on Bensu. He found it difficult to believe that Xylion would have revealed anything about a classified mission with a civilian, even if he was a close personal friend. And yet he couldn't, for the life of him, figure out how else Bensu could have attained this knowledge.

"It may be difficult to understand," Bensu continued. "Truthfully, I don't fully understand it myself, but I can sense what it is you've been trying to attempt."

So'Dan Leva, the chief tactical officer, had now taken an interest in this odd conversation as well, and to little surprise since the topic of conversation had started to take on security implications. "Sense it? How is that even possible?"

Bensu regarded the tall half-Romulan officer, but clearly not being intimidated by his suspicious attitude. "I can't say precisely. The best I've been able to come up with so far, is that I have some form of sensibility to this kind of thing. It would also explain why I have been feeling unwell lately, particularly when we were racing through space at very high warp speeds."

"I can attest to the fact that Bensu required medical attention while we were traveling under the power of the warp sled," Xylion said.

"Putting aside for a moment that this is quite a gift you seem to have there, Mister Bensu," Michael said. "Why did you feel it necessary to come up here and tell us this now? How is what you've been experiencing significant to what we are trying to do?"

Bensu looked him right in the eye. "Because, sir, I believe I think I know how to open the subspace rupture you're attempting to summon."

That left him speechless for a moment.

Leva seemed somewhat more sanguine about this revelation. "How exactly do you think you can do that?"

"Again, I can't say for sure," he said before glancing back at the captain. "But if you would let me, I will try."

Michael didn't even know where to start with this. This entire conversation was so surreal and unexpected; that a member of his civilian crew could not only know what they were trying to do but was able to offer to do it for them, was so far outside of what he could have expected, it left him without words.

"I understand that this is unusual and if you wish, I can leave you to this and never mention the matter again. But I do know that you will not be successful without my help."

"You can't possibly know that," said Leva, his suspicions rising to new heights.

"You are right," he said without any signs of taking offense. "I shouldn't. But I do."

"How?" the tactical officer challenged.

"You don't know," Michael said, already expecting this response.

Bensu simply nodded.

He turned to his science officer. "Commander, would you like to chip in here perhaps? You know Bensu better than anybody else on board. How feasible do you consider these claims to be?"

Surprisingly Xylion didn't make eye contact with the captain when he spoke, instead keeping his gaze firmly focused on Bensu. "He has shown certain aptitudes since I have known him that have been difficult to explain and yet have been irrefutable," he said and then finally looked at his captain. "I have no reason not to believe that he might be able to do what he claims."

Michael shook his head in amazement. "There clearly is a bigger story behind all this and under different circumstances, I would ask that you let me in on all the details before attempting something as crazy as this. But we are operating on a clock here so I'm inclined to trust you on this, Commander. For now," he said and looked back at Bensu. "What do you need?"

"Access to the sensors and the warp energy distribution grid," he said promptly.

"Captain," Leva said, clearly not liking the sound of this at all. "I urge caution."

He nodded. "Agreed," he said and looked back at the unexpected civilian guest. "You can have limited access to those systems from the science station right here," he told him. "But

Commander Xylion will oversee everything you do, and you will not be given access to any other critical systems of the ship.”

“That should be just fine, Captain. And thank you for trusting me.”

But Michael shook his head. “Let’s be very clear on this, Mister Benu. I trust my science officer. You have done nothing to earn my trust so far.”

“That is perfectly reasonable.”

Michael sighed. “God, I hope so.”

Xylion led Benu to his station where the man who usually tended the ship’s bar, ten decks below, took a seat in front of a bridge station that as far as Michael was concerned, he had never even laid eyes upon. This entire plan looked like anything but reasonable to him.

Xylion activated a few controls, presumably to ensure he had the access he had requested and nothing else beyond this.

Benu nodded. “This will work just fine,” he said and then began to gingerly activate several controls, evidencing that he was not used to this interface. It didn’t take him long, however, to get the hang of it, as, after just a few moments, he was tapping away as if he had worked on a Starfleet bridge all his life.

Leva had stepped up to the captain while they both observed Benu at work. “This feels very wrong, sir,” he said in a low tone of voice.

“I know it does. But if I’ve learned one thing over the years, Commander, it’s that sometimes the most unusual and unorthodox methods are the ones that bear the most fruit. We wouldn’t be out here if not for our willingness to embrace the strange and unfamiliar.”

“You think this can actually work?” he asked.

“Right now, I’m just trying to keep an open mind.”

A warning chime from his tactical board distracted Leva from continuing the conversation or keeping his skeptical eyes on the civilian working away at the science station as he turned back to his console. “Sir, I’m reading a spatial disturbance.”

“The subspace rupture?” he asked.

“If it is, we may have a big problem,” Leva said and looked up. “It’s forming on deck thirteen.”

Michael quickly stepped up to Bensu. "You didn't say you were creating the rupture on the ship."

"I didn't intend to," he said as he continued to work on the console. "But I think I can contain it."

"That's a big risk," Michael said. "I'm not sure I'm happy taking it."

The science officer looked over the readings on the science station. "So far all readings indicate that the anomaly is stable, sir."

He glanced back over his shoulder. "Commander, evacuate deck thirteen and post armed security at all access points. I want level ten force fields around the anomaly."

"Aye, sir," the tactical officer said and went to work.

Bensu stopped and lifted his hands off the console.

"What is it?" Michael asked.

He looked up with a tiny smile. "It's done. The subspace rupture is stable for now."

Xylion continued to study the data. "Confirmed, sir. But it is showing signs of degradation. According to my calculations, it will remain stable for approximately one hour and eleven minutes."

Bensu shook his head. "I think this is the best I can do. And I'm not sure I would be able to do it again if I tried," he said. "This might be the only chance we've got."

Michael shot the man a blank expression. He already knew better than to ask for an explanation considering how little he had been able to provide so far. Besides, their clock had just become a lot tighter. "When this is all over, we'll need to have a long chat, Mister Bensu," he said and then stepped away.

"Deck thirteen is fully evacuated. Force fields are in place," Leva said.

Michael nodded and walked up right beside him until he was standing at the tactical board. He looked down and found the command panels to activate a channel to the *Agamemnon*.

Amaya reappeared on the screen. "*We are still reviewing your data. Do you have your diagnostic results yet?*" she asked.

"No, but we have something better. We have been able to create the subspace rupture. Right here on *Eagle*." As odd as it sounded to say it, he had to admit that he took just a moment's worth of pleasure from her confused expression, considering her recent demeanor.

*"That's impossible."*

"Feel free to run your own scan. We have a stable subspace rupture on deck thirteen."

She consulted with Daystrom on her bridge for a moment before they both turned to look at him with stunned expressions. "How?"

He suppressed a little smirk, after all, he wasn't quite so sure himself. "Let's just say we had some unexpected help. I'll explain everything in due course but we don't have much time. The rupture will only remain stable for just a bit over one hour and we may not be able to recreate it once it is gone. We need to act now. I suggest you sent us the specifications for that personal shield module you mentioned."

She emphatically shook her head. *"You aren't prepared to enter the subspace portal. I have a team in place that has trained for this."*

"Think this through, Maya. By the time you and your team get here, that portal is long gone. If we want to do this, we need to do it now. Send me the specs and we replicate it. Then I will lead a team to make contact with the aliens. And the longer we hesitate, the less time we have to make this work at all. This might be our only chance at this."

She stared back at him, clearly not having expected this turn of events. Of course, then again, nobody had. *"I don't like this. I don't like it at all."*

"That would make two of us."

Then she nodded slowly and entered a few controls into a nearby computer station. When Michael glanced back down at the tactical board, he could see that they had received a data package from the *Agamemnon*.

*"We're heading your way at maximum warp,"* she said and gave the order to her helmsman.

"Send me everything you have on this subspace domain. You had weeks to prepare for this. I'll have minutes."

*"It'll be with you shortly."*

"I'll see you when I get back," he said. "Owens out."

Once she had disappeared from the screen again, he turned to consider his science officer. "Commander, we don't have much time. Get a team together and outfit them with the personal shield. Have

them meet us on deck thirteen. We'll enter the rupture as soon as we are ready."

"Understood. However, it is my duty as acting first officer to remind you that it violates Starfleet protocol for you to lead a potentially hazardous away mission."

Michael smirked despite himself, wondering if Amaya's first officer had quoted her with the exact same regulation. "We don't have a choice in this matter," he said. "I am the only person onboard fully briefed on the situation," he added, even if, in truth, he wasn't entirely certain how well exactly he had been briefed on this mission, considering that it should never have been him or his crew who were expected to enter into subspace. But then, of course, adapting to changing circumstances was as much part of the job as keeping an open mind about the strange and unexpected. "And I will need you on the team as well, which means, Mister Leva, you are in charge while we're gone."

"Yes, sir," the tactical officer said.

Bensu had stood from the science station in the meantime. "Sir, may I request that I accompany you as well?"

"Absolutely not," Leva said, without hesitation.

"I believe it is critical that I do."

Michael looked first at Bensu and then at Xylion who once again remained stone-faced. "Ordinarily I would have to agree with Mister Leva on this but it looks as if ordinary has just gone out of the airlock."

"Sir," Leva protested.

Michael simply clasped him on the shoulder. "Open mind, remember," he said. "Now, let's get going. Taking a stroll into subspace wasn't exactly on my to-do list when I got up this morning. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we're going to get some answers," he said as he headed toward the turbolift with Xylion and Bensu following close behind.

To his credit, he had considered making his case to Tazla Star once more, even if he was fairly certain what the outcome might be. In fact, he had sought her out again, finding her back in the small office of the medical facility and speaking to Lif Culsten who apparently had only just returned from the city.

He hadn't known exactly what they had been discussing, but it appeared to him that it was important to Star since she had glared at him angrily when he had interrupted them, and made it clear, in no uncertain terms, that she was not interested in another confrontation with him and that her focus was on the young Krellonian for now.

It suited Elijah just fine. After all, he had already made up his mind that he'd be going through with his plan with or without her blessing. The latter, he figured, actually would make the execution much easier.

"I don't think this is such a great idea," said Louise Hopkins as she followed him and Deen inside the *Nebuchadrezzar*. "The city is supposed to be off-limits."

"Clearly not," countered Elijah who had already exchanged his uniform, which he rarely if ever wore as to regulation specs anyway, for civilian garb, most notably a large and heavy coat with a deep hood, designed not only to keep him warm in the cold climate but also to hide his very un-Krellonian ears. "Considering that Mister Culsten has only just returned from that same city."

The chief engineer looked unconvinced. "I don't think that's quite the same as you visiting the city. He's Krellonian after all," she said but found him unimpressed by her argument while he collected and looked over a medical tricorder he meant to take with him. She glanced over at Deen instead to find an ally to her argument.

But she just shrugged. "He outranks us both. I suppose he could order us to help him."

Elijah looked up after he had secured the medical device and then shook his head. "I am not," he said. "But I will go through with this either way. The only lead we have in fighting this virus is in that city and I mean to find it. You two are under no obligation whatsoever to help me. But I will say this. If you don't, I will go through with this anyway and I'm not exactly all that confident anymore with how those blasted transporters work. If I had to

operate them by myself, there is a fairly good chance I'll beam myself right inside a wall or some such thing."

Hopkins gaped at him. "Great, so my options here are to either face the wrath of Commander Star or be potentially responsible for you accidentally atomizing yourself."

He grinned.

"I could probably get you into the city," said Deen, "but it would likely not go unnoticed." She looked at Hopkins. "I know you were given the access codes to the local transporter net to beam Lif into the city. It wouldn't be difficult at all for you to get him in without raising any alarms."

Hopkins sighed. "Yes, I suppose I could."

"Excellent," said Elijah with another large smile. "Time's a wasting, let's get to it." He stepped into the runabout's small transporter alcove and raised the hood of the heavy coat over his head.

"I would be more comfortable if you'd let me accompany you, Doctor," Deen said as she watched him take position.

But he quickly shook his head. "Let's not make this worse than it is already. Miss Hopkins is quite correct, Taz won't be happy about this once she finds out. I can handle her ire, but I don't mean to put you into that position."

Hopkins walked over to the controls. "As if she won't know that you had help."

"You can always claim that I sweet-talked you into doing this," Elijah said. "I would have you know that I was quite the charmer in my younger days."

Hopkins stopped and looked up at him with a blank expression. "No offense, Doctor, but that argument will definitely not stand up at my court martial."

"Must've lost a step or two over the years," he mumbled to himself.

Deen smiled at him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Just one or two?" she continued before he could protest. "Good luck out there. And watch yourself. If you get into any kind of trouble, let us know and we'll pull you out."

He gave her an appreciative nod.

"All right, I think I've got it. The Paradise Quarter, was it?" said Hopkins.

"That's right," said Deen and joined her by the controls.

"Well, that's nowhere near where Lif beamed to. Appears to be on the outskirts of the city," the engineer said.

"Then that's where I need to go," he said and then knocked against the transporter bulkhead. "Energize this contraption whenever you're ready."

Deen and Hopkins exchanged a quick smirk and then Hopkins activated the controls. "Contraption being energized."

Elijah had never fully enjoyed the process of being broken down into subatomic parts, being shot across the ether, and then being reassembled again in some other place altogether. Perhaps it was because of his medical background and his understanding of how delicate a living body truly was, and how much could go wrong with it. Or maybe he just didn't like the idea of entrusting a machine with knowing exactly how to dissolve a human being, and more importantly, how to put one back together.

He preferred the old-fashioned way of transportation using shuttles and other vehicles that didn't depend on deconstructing a person to get them from point A to point B. He did, however, appreciate that sometimes transporters were enormously practical, such as when you needed to get somewhere quickly without anybody else finding out about it.

He wasn't entirely sure what to expect once he arrived at his destination. What he realized straight away, however, was that the Paradise Quarter did not live up to its name at all.

He had materialized in a narrow alley between two not just old but clearly quite dilapidated buildings that looked as if they had not seen any kind of regular maintenance in his lifetime. There was an almost overpowering stench of garbage and sewage in the air and he was fairly sure he could hear overlapping sounds of people shouting and crying and a lot of banging sounds as if somebody was purposefully smashing pieces of metal together.

"Charming locale," he muttered. "Must remember to book my next shore leave here."

*"Deen to Katanga."*

He felt the combadge he wore under his heavy coat vibrate slightly. He found it and tapped it. "Katanga here."

*"Doctor, did you arrive all right?"*

"Surprisingly, I'm still in one piece. Right in the middle of Paradise."

*"What is that terrible noise?"*

"It must be what goes on Krellon for popular music. Honestly, I'm not surprised they don't have ears with all this dreadful commotion," he said, even though he was quite aware that Krellonians picked up sound waves through the epidermis of their skin. However, after hearing this ruckus, he was wondering if perhaps they perceived sounds differently. He made a note to look into that once he had some more time on his hands.

*"I'm glad you arrived safely, Doctor. I suggest you try to keep a low profile. We'll have to keep comms to a minimum from now on if you wish to remain undetected. Once you're ready to come back, just tap your combadge twice and we'll hone in on your position and bring you back."*

"Thanks, Dee. Katanga out."

After closing the link, he set out by carefully walking down the alley and doing his best to breathe through his mouth to try and avoid the awful-smelling fumes lingering in the air.

The alley led to a wider street with fast-moving traffic. The skimmers raced left and right, hovering above the surface of the street, and never slowed as if trying to get through this area as quickly as possible. He couldn't exactly blame the drivers.

The sidewalks looked pretty devoid of foot traffic. He spotted some individuals who were mostly moving with purpose, avoiding eye contact with each other and with the few people who were occupying makeshift dwellings made out of torn cloth or boxes.

Very few of the people he spotted were actual Krellonians. Instead, he saw lupine T'aq, like his reluctant patient back at the hospital, as well as Kridrips and reptilian Zel. He guessed that Krellonians were behind the controls of those skimmers racing by.

He pulled out his tricorder as inconspicuously as he could and ran a quick scan for signs of the infection. It came up negative.

He brought up an area map on his device instead and found the more specific area that Deen had learned had been the likely

epicenter of the virus and headed out, keeping to the many, narrow alleyways and avoiding the larger thoroughfares.

He only realized that this approach had been a mistake after it was already too late. While there was much less traffic in the back alleys, he did draw more attention to himself in the narrow passageways and while he kept his human facial features well hidden under his hood, he couldn't as easily disguise his alien gait.

"You don't belong here," the tall, lanky, and brown-scaled reptilian said who was blocking his path and made no move to step out of his way. "Who are you? I never seen you here before."

"Just ... passing through," he said and cursed himself for not having come up with a better cover story for his presence. But then again, he was a doctor, not a spy.

"Yes. I am as well," he said with a large grin that revealed a wide row of long and sharp teeth, many of which were crooked. "I am passing through myself. Have been passing through here for the last twenty cycles."

"You must take to the locale then, I suppose."

"Lovely place. Lots of soft, chewy humanoids."

The alleyway didn't offer many places to escape. The only choice he truly had was to turn back the way he had come from but one look at those powerful legs on the Zel told him that he would likely not make it five meters before he caught up.

"You look chewy."

"I think you'd be rather disappointed," said Elijah. "I am old and slow, don't get as much exercise as I should and my diet has far too little carbohydrates and saturates to make for an appealing meal."

The reptilian tilted his head sideways in confusion. Or maybe it was female, Elijah was entirely sure. What was clear, however, was that the creature didn't follow. He noticed something else. Its pupils looked dilated and discolored as if he was under the influence of some sort of substance. He had seen this before in Saurians and other reptile species.

The Zel made a threatening step closer, forcing Elijah to make one back. "You'll make a decent little snack. And the fact that you are old means I don't have to chase you much."

Elijah hadn't brought a phaser with him, didn't believe in them. But he had something else and he searched for it under his coat as he

spoke. "The other thing you should probably consider is that I'm not from around here. In fact, I'm not even from within the Alliance. Your metabolism won't know what to make of me. You'll probably have a miserable time digesting me for days. I expect some serious gastrointestinal distress. It might even kill you eventually," he said and pulled his hood back to reveal his face.

There were other humanoids within the Krellonian Star Alliance, of course, but none looked quite like humans and the surprise was noticeable in the reptilian's widened eyes.

"I like exotic food," it finally snarled.

Elijah found what he had been looking for in his inside pocket and pulled out the hypospray. "Or you could have some of this," he said.

"What is it?"

"A particularly potent drug called Syndicate-Y. Peddled mostly by the Orion Syndicate, not sure if you have heard of them. It guarantees a marvelous high lasting for hours, sometimes days. No other drug is known to have quite the same hallucinatory effect on the brain and the senses. In other words, it's one hell of a trip."

The Zel was immediately intrigued and stepped closer "I have heard stories of the Syndicate and their drugs."

"In which case you really should get a taste, shouldn't you?" Elijah said and then quickly brought up the hypospray and pressed it hard against the scales of its arm until the low hiss indicated the successful delivery of the agent.

The reptilian hissed angrily and struck out, hitting Katanga square in the chest. The blow of the impact lifted him up and pushed him hard into the nearby wall where he sagged down to the dirty ground.

"What have you done?" he snarled and approached Elijah threateningly.

"I've given you what you wanted," he said as he tried to pull himself up onto a sitting position, fighting through the pain of his bruised body. "Right now, the Y is beginning to course through your veins and mixing with your cold blood. It'll reach your higher brain function any second. Once it does, you'll thank me."

"I'll bite your head off first," he said and continued to approach.

Elijah couldn't help but start wondering if he had miscalculated. After all, he knew little about the anatomy of the Zel and had only guessed based on other reptilian races he was familiar with. It was not out of the question that this particular one was immune to the effects of the drug he had administered. It would have been the last mistake he'd ever make.

"You think you are very clever," he said.

"I've heard that one before."

The Zel opened its wide mouth as it began to bend down.

Then it stopped.

"It usually starts with a tingling sensation in your fingers. Well, claws in your case."

The Zel closed its jaw and brought up his claws, looking at them curiously.

"Next, you'll likely feel a little numb in your legs. That's perfectly normal."

He sagged a little bit as he took a step backward.

"And you'll feel lightheaded."

He reached up to grab hold of his large, scaled head.

Elijah picked himself up from the ground slowly. "You'd really want to sit down for this."

The reptilian pretty much crashed down into a heap and looked up at Elijah who was now hovering above him. "What have you done?"

"You'll thank me later."

Then the Zel passed out.

"Particularly once you realize that the anetrizine compound I just gave you will give you the best sleep you've likely had in years. Mark my words, drugs are bad for you and will kill you eventually. Get some help," he said and readjusted his coat, which had come slightly undone, and pulled his hood back up. His bones ached terribly from the blow he had received and he was fairly certain he had bruised his sternum and his backside in the subsequent landing. "I'm getting too old for this."

After a few minutes, he had left the napping Zel behind and had closed in on the area where the Krellonians had first discovered victims of the Piquis Plague.

Unfortunately, there wasn't much to find. The area was made up of what looked like large warehouses that had fallen into disuse. The few buildings he managed to gain access to seemed mostly empty.

His tricorder wasn't much help either, finding no trace of anything that could lead him to a possible cause for the disease.

Left with little options, he found a lupine T'aq huddled in a corner, licking its dirty fur. Judging by the grayish pelt, he was advanced in years and likely not as much of a threat as the Zel had been. He hardly even reacted to Elijah stepping up to him and after a moment he thought he knew why as his eyes were unnaturally white and glazed over.

"I'm looking for something and I was hoping you could help me find it," Eli said.

The T'aq turned his snout up and tried to focus his eyes but seemingly to little effect.

"I've been told that people around this area got sick a little while ago. Do you know anything about this?"

But the lupine remained silent, considering Elijah with empty eyes.

"Maybe you've heard something?"

"This one hears things," he said and then, as if everything on the subject had been said, returned to licking its pelt.

"What have you heard?"

"This one hears the crying and the shouting. It hears the wind howling and the ships buzzing."

Elijah looked around for a moment to take in their surroundings. The shouting and banging were still noticeable even in this abandoned part of the Paradise Quarter. The howling winds had become so ubiquitous, he had almost started to tune it out. He couldn't see or hear any ships, however. He glanced back at the T'aq. "You've heard ships?"

"Every night this one heard the ships. Coming and going, coming and going, humming and buzzing. This one didn't care for the humming and buzzing. It disturbed this one when it tried to sleep."

"Are these ships still coming here?"

“This one doesn’t hear the buzzing anymore. This one sleeps now at night. Undisturbed.”

He wondered how one could possibly sleep in this part of town at all without the help of a powerful anesthetic. “When did the ships stop coming here?”

“Five and ten nights. Maybe. Ten and ten nights. Maybe. After the soldiers came and took away those who did no longer walk. Quiet nights since then.”

“I guess, quiet is relative,” Elijah said. “But that might coincide with the beginning of the outbreak. And if those who fell sick came here on ships, perhaps this virus came from off-world. It may have been introduced to Piquis here but it could have originated elsewhere.”

The T’aq wasn’t paying any attention to his musings.

“These ships where did they land? Where was it the noisiest?”

The lupine pointed at one of the larger warehouses. “Stay away from that one, if you wish to sleep at night. This one did.”

He had already attempted to enter the building that he had pointed out but he had found the only access door securely shut with no obvious way inside. There had been no windows or even cracks to get a glimpse at the interior either.

“Thank you, you were really quite helpful,” Elijah said and headed back toward that warehouse, beginning to round the entire building that was no easy task since it was quite expansive. If some sort of starships had landed here, it had to be sizable.

After searching for the better part of an hour, he finally found a possible way inside. But it would require climbing up a tall ladder and onto the roof a good twenty meters above.

He craned his neck back to look at the narrow ladder and tugged at a few of the rungs to make sure they would hold his weight. He uttered a heavy sigh. “I’m definitely getting too old for this.”

“I agree wholeheartedly.”

Elijah whipped around upon hearing the voice behind him to find a very angry Tazla Star standing just a few meters away flanked by two Starfleet security guards.

“And while I normally like to think that age is not a factor in keeping us from achieving our goals, I know for a fact that it should

imbue us with the wisdom not to run off half-cocked on our own and disregard all orders and good prudence," she said as she crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Then again, prudence has never been your strength, has it?"

### 3

It was not unlike if somebody or something, some deity or advanced and superior being, had ripped a hole right into the fabric of the universe itself, torn away, as it were, at the thin veneer that covered all of reality to lay bare the ugly and frightening innards of all of existence.

And space-time had been ripped open right in front of their eyes, in the middle of an otherwise unaffected and unexceptional section of starship corridor.

The fissure glowed and pulsed like an angry wound, only a meter or so of it was fully exposed, the rest of it vanished right into the bulkhead and was partially visible from the room that lay on the other side of the corridor.

The area inside the two-meter-tall fissure, a mass of dark crimson and burnt orange swirled with no apparent pattern and with no indication whatsoever of what awaited them beyond.

"And we're quite sure that this ... thing ... will lead somewhere?" So'Dan Leva said, almost to himself, as his eyes stayed focused on the unlikely anomaly that had appeared inside the ship and behind a couple of force fields, which albeit stable, he was beginning to have serious doubts would be powerful enough to protect the rest of *Eagle* from whatever this fissure could do if it decided to expand.

"Yes."

He glanced over to Bensus who looked even more mesmerized by the rupture and refused to let it out of his sight for even a moment.

The captain, standing nearby, seemed more fascinated by a padd he had been studying and he believed contained a brief they had received from the *Agamemnon* only shortly after Owens had

made the call to enter the fissure himself. It had been marked eyes-only so he had not seen the content.

Also present were four of the Special Mission Team operatives they had only recently brought onboard for exactly these kinds of missions. The team was made up of their second-in-command who went by the moniker Diamond, a tall, muscular, and dark-skinned woman who looked strong enough to give him a run for his money. He couldn't recall the odd names the others went by; a blue-skinned and short-haired Andorian male, a Vulcan woman with an exceptionally dark complexion, and a mean-looking Nausicaan who stood taller than anyone else present. All four of them appeared dangerous as did their decidedly non-standard issue weaponry they were currently in the process of checking over. And as if they didn't stand out enough already, none of them wore proper Starfleet uniforms.

Interestingly, none of them seemed the slightest bit fazed by the anomaly as if encountering a subspace fissure was an everyday occurrence for them. So'Dan was fairly confident that this was not the case.

The final member of the away team was science officer Xylion who was finishing up calibrating his tricorder for whatever he expected to find on the other side.

So'Dan turned to the captain. "Sir, I know we have covered this already, but I feel like I would be remiss in my duties if I didn't try at least one more time to talk you out of going in there yourself."

Owens handed him the padd, clearly having finished with it. Leva quickly noticed that he had already wiped the content. "I can see that your stint as first officer has had an effect on you," he said and offered a smirk. "Which is good as it makes me more comfortable about leaving *Eagle* in your excellent care. But my mind is made up on the issue. It'll have to be me, I'm afraid."

He knew when an argument was lost. "Understood, sir. I guess I don't have to remind you to be extremely careful."

"I'm sure our new friends have this part covered."

Diamond said nothing but the woman offered a marginal nod.

So'Dan didn't doubt their capabilities and yet somehow he couldn't help wish that it was Nora Laas who was accompanying the

captain instead. His Bajoran friend and security chief had made a name for herself in protecting the captain over the years.

Hearing somebody approach from behind, he turned to see Alendra coming jogging down the corridor with two crewmen in close pursuit, all of them carrying armbands of some sort.

They came to a stop in front of the group. The young Bolian was briefly distracted by the unusual sight of the pulsating rift in the corridor just a few meters ahead before she turned to Owens. "We've just finished replicating the personal shields. According to the instructions from *Agamemnon*, these will need to be configured precisely or you will not be able to withstand the pressures in subspace for long. And even with these devices, you'll have less than an hour before you'll be forced to return."

"That's just enough time until the fissure destabilizes again," he said as she began to attach the first device onto his right upper arm. He glanced at the armband as it hummed to life. "Were you able to test them?"

"Not as much as I would have liked," she admitted. "We know they work and theoretically should keep you reasonably well protected. But a lot of this is guesswork since we are not entirely sure what you'll encounter on the other side of the anomaly."

"A risk we'll have to take," said Owens and watched her finish calibrating the armband and then activate the shield which briefly flickered around him, covering him from head to toe in a nearly skintight energy envelope.

She then moved on to Xylion while the two other crewmembers did the same for the SMT operatives and Bensu.

"Are we ready?" Owens said once all had been fitted, looking over the rest of the team.

Everyone responded in the affirmative.

"Very well," he said. "Mister Leva, your first priority is to keep the crew safe. Keep a close eye on the fissure. If it threatens to expand in any way, putting *Eagle* in danger, I want you to get this thing off my ship by any means necessary. Even if we are not back yet."

He didn't like the order, but he understood the necessity. "We'll jettison this entire section if we have to."

Michael nodded in agreement and then turned to look at the fissure. "Computer drop the force field immediately in front of me."

The computer acknowledged with a soft trill and the force field flared briefly before it vanished.

Owens and the others stepped closer to the anomaly carefully. Then the captain looked back at Leva.

He nodded. "Computer, re-establish the force field."

It snapped back into place immediately.

"Time to see where the rabbit hole goes," Owens said and to Leva's chagrin took point as he was the first man to step into the fissure, disappearing from the ship. The remaining six members of the team followed him with no hesitation.

"When you asked me to come join you on *Eagle* you never told me I had to face reality-bending nightmares such as this," said Alendra as she kept her eyes on the vanishing away team.

"Welcome aboard, Lieutenant," said So'Dan as he watched Bensu disappear last. "Reality-bending nightmares are just another Tuesday afternoon around here."

\* \* \*

Michael hadn't been sure what to expect when leaving behind their realm and stepping inside one entirely foreign to him and those others like him; carbon-based lifeforms who dwelled solely in a universe with well-established laws of physics.

It was an immediate assault on all his senses all at once.

Bright, pulsing lights robbed him of his sight as soon as he had stepped through the fissure, unable to make out almost anything around him. A high-pitched screech, like the sound of an entire flock of dying birds, drilled deep into his brain, making it near impossible to focus on anything. It was hopeless to even try and define the odors he perceived, clearly beyond anything he had ever experienced before. More importantly, however, he found it extremely difficult to breathe, as if he was swallowing gulps of bitter-tasting liquids with each breath he took.

He thought he perceived somebody at his side but struggled to make out any features. Whoever it was, reached for the band around

his upper arm and he was far too dazzled by his stunted senses to offer any form of resistance.

Then, slowly, things began to normalize. His vision began to clear up and he was beginning to make out the clear shapes of objects and people around him. The persistent high-pitch tone lessened until it faded to little more than background noise, and his breathing, which had threatened to become panicked with the prospect of slowly suffocating to death, slowed as his lungs began to fill with much-needed air, even if it still left a foul taste in his mouth. Considering the alternative, he gobbled it down greedily.

He was finally able to make out Xylion who had apparently stepped up to him to reconfigure his personal shield. "I have recalibrated the phase variance of the force field in an attempt to mitigate the effect of the subspace environment on our carbon-based organisms. We will still experience a level of disorientation due to an absence of carbon in this dimension, but it should allow us to operate for a limited time in this realm."

It was still odd watching Xylion, who stood less than a meter away from him speak. His mouth moved but his words didn't seem to register until a few microseconds after, causing his lip movements to be noticeably out of sync with his voice. When Michael tried to nod to acknowledge what he had said, his head felt heavy; the sensation of each movement greatly exaggerated. "It definitely helps. But I'd rather not stay here a moment longer than we have to," he said, his voice sounding distorted and alien to his own ears. Moving very slowly, he turned to consider the rest of his team.

Two of the Niners, the Andorian who went by Boom, and the team leader Diamond seemed most affected. Grunt was on all fours already, slowly shaking his head, while Diamond had dropped to one knee with her head resting in one of her hands. The Nausicaan remained on his feet but the tall man was noticeably swaying while the Vulcan woman, Ivory, seemed to handle the strange environment slightly better, keeping fully upright but noticeably distracted.

Bensu, Michael was barely surprised to find, looked the least affected, studying their surroundings carefully, and other than his much slower movements, he showed no signs that he was feeling the same effects he and the other team members experienced.

“Help the others,” Michael said to Xylion, he assumed that the Vulcan science officer had already made the necessary alterations to his own force field, since he moved fairly steadily as he began to tend to the rest of the team, even if to his eyes, every move he made looked slightly twisted, and he left behind a noticeable wake, almost like an after-shadow.

Satisfied that the team was being tended to, Michael took a few steps forward himself, feeling almost immediate resistance from an unseen force. As an avid diver, he equated the sensation to swimming through a particularly dense ocean on an alien world.

The strobing bright lights had been replaced by a dull crimson and orange glow that seemed prevalent here, like a veil covering every square meter of this world. The fissure had led them into what looked like a windowless room with a high ceiling and unremarkable walls that had visibly protruding conduits and tubing.

Most interesting perhaps was the floor. It seemed to consist of a bright, bluish walkway constructed of a solid but transparent material. Michael guessed either force fields or some form of hard light. These light bridges didn't always extend all the way to the walls and had no handles or railings. He could see no floor underneath, just a dark empty void, giving him vertigo the longer he looked at it.

Bensu walked past Michael and further into the room, looking around carefully before his eyes wandered back toward his.

“Does this place look familiar to you?” Michael asked. “Have you been here before?”

He seemed to ponder that question for a moment but his face only mirrored confusion. “I cannot be certain.”

Michael noticed that Xylion had seen to the Niners who were now all back on their feet again. “I don't care for this place,” grunted Boom as he was slowly trying to get used to his surroundings.

“Agreed,” said Michael. “Let's try to do what we came here for and get out as soon as possible.”

“What exactly, if I may ask, are we here for, sir,” Diamond said. She sounded almost defiant, or perhaps it was the way her voice echoed oddly in this place. Either way, Michael was sure she was not used to speaking to superior officers, which was hardly surprising since the Niners usually didn't tend to split up and she was likely

more comfortable following their team leader than a starship captain she barely knew.

Michael had to acknowledge that he had given them very little information about their mission, partially because of the strict operational security Jarik had insisted upon, but also because there had been little time for a mission brief, considering the circumstances. "This area of subspace is inhabited by a race of beings we believe are planning an invasion into our realm. This is a reconnaissance mission. We are to learn whatever we can about their plans, either by capturing data or obtaining intelligence directly from these aliens."

To her credit, Diamond seemed entirely unfazed by learning about a possible invasion and simply offered a nod. "What are our rules of engagement?"

"We are here to reconnoiter only. That means we are not to directly engage these aliens unless we have no other choice. Ideally, they never even knew we were here."

The Nausicaan uttered a rough-sounding chortle to this.

It was Boom, the Andorian who put a finer point to it. "Best laid plans."

Diamond was not having this. "Stow it, people," she barked. "This is the kind of thing we do. If the captain wants us to be ghosts, we're ghosts. *Facta, non verba.*"

"*Facta, non verba,*" the others repeated quietly. Ivory, the Vulcan seemed to barely mouth the words.

Xylion pointed at the only visible door. "I propose we set out in that direction."

Michael nodded and looked at the lead Niner. "Take point."

Diamond for her part delegated the task to Ivory who raised her compact phaser rifle that barely resembled the Starfleet-issue carbine it seemed to be based on, and moved out without a word. Diamond followed, then Xylion, Michael, and Bensus with the remaining two operatives taking up the rear.

Ivory managed to open the door quietly, using a surprising amount of strength her trim figure did not reveal she possessed, and the team slipped through the gap she had created.

Beyond the initial room, they found a corridor that split into three directions, each one lined with a narrow walkway, which was

also the main source of light. The Vulcan glanced back at him to be given instructions.

"I am having difficulties adapting the tricorder to this environment," Xylion said when Michael considered him.

Michael picked a random direction and the team continued on.

The walls and high ceilings didn't change much from what they had seen initially. There were markings and alien script decorating some parts but nothing Xylion's tricorder was able to translate.

Michael couldn't be sure, and certainly, his senses were barely reliable in this bizarre environment, but had he been back in their home dimension, he would have thought that they had arrived on a ship or space station of some kind.

The team moved single-file down the corridor since there wasn't much room on the light bridge, as expected the Niners moved quietly and alertly even through the dense atmosphere that made every step slow and awkward.

Michael could see the end of the corridor up ahead and shortly before they reached it, Ivory slowed and then finally stopped, taking a knee and holding up her fist. She had spotted something. She quickly relayed her findings to Diamond who joined him to give a report. "There is a larger room ahead," she whispered. "At least two individuals inside. Possibly three."

"Let's have a look," he said and then set out slowly, along with her, Xylion, and Bensus to get as close as possible to the edge of the room without being noticed. All three took turns to glance into the room.

On his first attempt, Michael could spot two individuals, tall and dressed in long, silvery robes with deep hoods covering their heads. Both had their backs turned to him, making it impossible to see any faces. They seemed to utter soft clicking noises that could have been an alien language.

"One of the aliens is working on what appears to be a computer console," said Xylion quietly after he had spied into the room. "We might be able to extract information from that device."

"Worth a try. But we would need to get rid of the aliens first," said Michael.

"They are not expecting an attack," Diamond said. "We should be able to neutralize them quickly."

But Bensus shook his head. "You have no idea if and how your weapons will work here, or what kind of effect they may have on these aliens."

"We may not need weapons," said Michael after he had ventured another look, noticing both aliens walking, or rather waddling, toward a far exit and leaving the room.

"That's convenient," said Diamond after she had verified what he had seen.

"It's an opportunity," he said, "Let's move."

Diamond took the lead this time and slipped inside with the butt of her modified combat rifle resting against her shoulder as she swept the room. The others followed.

Not a moment after he had stepped into the room, Michael heard urgent clicking sounds coming from somewhere behind him.

Ivory reacted quicker than anyone else, whirling around with impressive speed and delivering a direct strike against the alien's head with the stock of her rifle. To Michael the whole thing was nothing more than a blur, until the creature tumbled out of the shadows, stumbling at first before collapsing onto the floor.

Diamond was already instructing her people to secure the only two entrances to the room as she and the others assembled around the fallen alien. Its hood had fallen back slightly to allow them their first proper look at it.

Michael had seen images of these beings from the intelligence package Jarik had made available and that had come from Starfleet's only previous encounter with this race seven years prior, but seeing one close-up was no comparison.

The creature looked reptile, almost insectile, with clearly purplish and scaly skin, a spiky ridge traveling from its flat nose all the way up its face and head and two large, bulging round eyes with deep, dark, and soulless cavities at their center. He couldn't entirely suppress a shudder at seeing this nightmarish-looking creature, even if he wasn't proud of this reaction to encountering an alien life form.

Diamond had taken a knee next to it and was studying the creature more closely. "One ugly bastard all right. And I cannot say if it's alive or dead."

"It's still alive," said Bensus, which earned him a few blank looks, he didn't seem to notice.

“Keep an eye on it,” Michael told Diamond. “We'll see what we can learn from the computer console they were working on.”

The woman stood back up and leveled her rifle at the incapacitated alien while he, Xylion, and Bensu stepped away.

The first thing Michael noticed was the large, oval-shaped viewport in the room. Beyond it, he got his first look at what lay beyond. It was difficult, however, to say with certainty if they were on a planet, in space, or some other environment altogether. All he could see through the window was a mass of swirling coral-colored something with occasional white streaks moving across it. He wasn't sure if he was looking at a form of matter, gas, or something else entirely.

He decided to focus on the freestanding, black, and cylindrical-shaped console instead that stood almost like a column, taking up the entire height of the room and was half-embedded into the wall. The holographic control interface glimmered with a faint greenish light, hovering just above the otherwise blank and featureless panel.

Xylion had his tricorder out again. “I have been able to configure the tricorder to partially recognize our environment, however, I am not able to establish a data link with this console. I am detecting an underlying current of an unknown energy pattern.”

“What is the nature of that pattern?” Michael asked

“Unknown. It does appear similar to certain forms of psionic energy.”

Michael didn't miss Bensu staring at the console, his eyes taking on a focused look as if he was trying to concentrate on something. “Are you getting anything from this?”

Bensu didn't respond straight away and then turned to consider him just as he was about to repeat his question. “There's something here, of that there is no doubt. But — I can't be sure what it is. I think we need to be very mindful of our next steps,” he said with noticeable uncertainty lacing his voice, he seemed reticent to even approach the device looming in front of him.

“We came here for a reason and we've got to start somewhere,” Michael said as he stepped closer to look over the holographic panels of the console, none of which, of course, told him anything. There was also a distinct lack of any kind of screen or output device, making him wonder how any of this was meant to function. He

reached out for the controls gingerly, his fingers passing right through the holographic projection and he felt the surface of the console smooth and cold to the touch.

A sudden bolt, like a static shock, caused him to quickly withdraw his hand.

“Captain?” Xylion said.

“I’m fine, just a little charge of some –”

It had been more than that, he realized almost immediately as he felt himself stumbling backward suddenly and for no obvious reason. He heard voices he believed belonged to Xylion and Bensus but he couldn't make out what they were saying. His eyes focused on the viewport where the world outside had begun to expand into the room, quickly filling out his entire vision until there was nothing left but the coral-colored mass, having completely engulfed him. He felt the hard-light floor underneath him give way suddenly and he began to tumble into an endless void.

He saw images race passed him the way he had always imagined they would when a person was about to die, his own life, literally flashing in front of his eyes, offering him one last glimpse of his past before it would all disappear from his grasp forever.

He saw himself back home on Earth with his late mother who had passed when he had still been young. He saw Matthew his brother, who had lost his life years earlier. He saw Amaya smiling at him like she hadn't done in some time. He saw his father still alive and well. He saw himself back in familiar surroundings on the bridge of *Eagle*.

But none of it, he quickly realized felt right. Because none of it had ever quite happened in the way he was seeing in those snippets. His mother looked older than she had been when she had died.

Matthew, too, looked quite different than how he remembered him, wearing his hair much longer than he had ever done when he had been alive. And he was with Westren Frobisher, the man who had been his brother's longtime friend and colleague and who had been responsible for his death and who had been killed years later when he had fallen off a precipice after he had attempted to change the past. In this vision, the two men were once again close and dear friends.

Amaya looked as lovely as always but she seemed to be practically glowing now as he held her in his arms, kissing her more passionately than he ever recalled doing with no sign at all of her recent aloofness.

That image of bliss lasted only mere seconds before it was replaced with one of outright horror, and every Starfleet officer's greatest nightmare: The Borg. There were drones everywhere he looked, mercilessly inching closer from all directions until he was entirely surrounded. He screamed as he felt their injection tubes worming deep into his skin and releasing their deadly nanobots into his bloodstream until he felt himself turning into a cyborg from the inside out.

His vision blinked out for a moment and when the light returned, all he could see was a massive, ring-shaped structure, spinning slowly like a wheel, creating a headache-inducing vortex.

The massive head of the alien being emerged from the eye of the maelstrom, its dark, dead eyes flaring with sudden bright and blinding light until his world turned into bleak, white nothingness.

*"Captain, are you all right?"*

He heard the voice somewhere in the back of his head and couldn't be sure if it was still part of the visions or if it was real.

When he felt a hand on his shoulder, he opened his eyes to see Bensus and Xylion hovering above him. He was lying flat on his back on the smooth light floor that apparently had never stopped functioning. He raised his arm to grab the hand Xylion was holding out for him. The Vulcan easily lifted him back onto his feet. "What happened?"

"You appear to have been affected by the physical contact with the device. You lost your balance and fell. You were also unconscious for five point three seconds."

"Felt much longer than that."

"You saw something," said Bensus.

Michael shook his head, trying to clear his head of the cobwebs that were still clinging to his mind. "I think so. They were visions of some sort. Of my life but also ... not."

Xylion briefly considered the device again. "It is possible that the console operates by creating a telepathic link with its operator. Since humans and other carbon-based lifeforms are likely not

compatible with this technology, you may have experienced hallucinations instead.”

“Maybe,” Michael said. “Or maybe it did work and it showed me things that are real.” He recalled Jarik mentioning a subspace portal that he believed the aliens were building to allow them to invade their space. The ring-shaped structure and the vortex it had created certainly fit that bill. “If that’s true, I think I may know how they plan on carrying out their invasion.”

Bensu didn’t look as convinced. “Xylion is right. What you have experienced might not have been visions at all. For all, we know they could be random images generated by your subconscious mind. Or some other anomaly created by your contact with alien telepathic technology. It might be best not to draw definite conclusions from what you’ve seen.”

Xylion offered a brief nod. “I agree. We have no way of verifying what you experienced is in fact based on reality.”

Michael knew that they were both right, and yet something he couldn’t quite explain told him that those hadn’t been just random images spawned by his mind like a fever dream. He also understood that he needed to see more before he could even hope to begin to understand anything he had experienced. “Commander, perhaps we can try a more controlled approach via a mind-meld. We could attempt to link with the device using you as some sort of buffer.”

“I would not recommend such an approach,” Xylion said immediately.

Michael didn’t have time to consider it further either since Boom was hissing an urgent warning from the far entrance he was guarding. “We’re about to have company.”

Michael could already hear the clipping noises drawing nearer. The aliens were returning, perhaps trying to find out what had happened to their fallen comrade.

“And this time, it’s a crowd.”

Michael was momentarily torn between trying to get more answers and avoiding an all-out conflict with the locals. The safety of his team easily won out the argument. “Let’s get out of here,” he said but pointed at the unconscious creature Diamond was still guarding. “But we’re taking that one with us.”

Xylion stepped up to the downed alien and easily picked up the robed creature to carry it over his shoulder. Not a moment later the team set out, retracing their steps and returning the way they had come, this time at a much more rapid pace.

The clicking noises pursuing the team were still closing in, increasing in speed and urgency and soon Michael thought he could hear the ghastly sounds coming not just from behind him but from every angle.

“Let’s move,” he said, trying to spur on his team. “We need to get out of here now.”

“Not so easy when trying to walk through molasses,” said Boom, showing his frustration at the slow progress they were making due to their environment.

Michael could feel it too, the faster they were trying to move the tougher the resistance seemed to be. Even Xylion, who additionally had to contend with the alien he was carrying, was beginning to show signs of exhaustion. Only Bensu, it appeared, remained unaffected, having since taken over point from the Vulcan woman who had been leading them previously.

By the time they reached the three-way junction, Michael was entirely out of breath and felt increasingly disoriented by those popping sounds, unable to tell if they were coming from behind or the front.

The SMT team instinctively moved to secure the three passageways while Michael and Xylion approached the door that would lead them back toward the fissure. Unfortunately for them, the gap Ivory had created only a few minutes prior was now closed again.

Michael tried his hands on pushing it open but struggled to move the heavy panel until Bensu stepped up to help him.

The clicking and popping were now so loud and noticeable, that Michael was certain one of the aliens had to be standing right behind him. He turned just in time to see one of the cloaked figures emerge from the corridor on the far right and strike out with a tall, staff-like weapon and striking the Nausicaan standing closest right across the chest.

The massive man flew backward from the force of the impact only to go smashing into the far wall with a painful groan. Michael

sprung forward and reached him before he could go over the edge of the light bridge.

The other operatives responded by opening fire on the alien with their phaser rifles, striking it once, twice, three times before it dropped to its knees.

From another corridor, another creature emerged, holding another staff. It thumped it loudly onto the floor, creating a powerful shockwave that flattened the remaining Niners and pushed both Michael and Bensu against the door.

Diamond managed to squeeze off a shot with her rifle even as she tried to get back onto her feet, but the beam did little more than cause the creature to stumble.

“Go, go,” Michael shouted and reached out for Grunt, the Nausicaan, picking him up and pushing him towards the small gap in the door.

Clambering back onto their feet the remaining operatives followed suit, as did Xylion and Bensu.

Michael could see the pulsating fissure just ahead, mere meters away now. He couldn't tell if it was his imagination, or if something had happened to the dense atmosphere, but the closer he got to it, the harder it became to move as if something was trying to actively hold him back from reaching their only escape route.

Two more robed figures appeared between the team and the fissure where none had been a moment before.

The first brought up its staff and without thinking, Michael grabbed it between its claw-like hands, trying to either wrestle it away from it or stop it from using it on the team.

What he hadn't factored in, however, was the alien's much greater physical strength, or perhaps it was merely the fact that it could move within this atmosphere with far more speed and alacrity. Whatever it was, Michael felt himself being lifted off the floor as the creature raised the staff higher, and then with a quick sideways jerk, causing him to lose his grip and fly across the room and hit the wall with such force, he felt all the air bursting out of his lungs.

Through half-open eyes, he watched the rest of the team trying to take on the aliens with little success.

Diamond landed another hit with her phaser that was easily absorbed before the staff struck her across the side of her head with enough force to send her tumbling to the ground.

Ivory used her weapon to deflect a strike from the other creature, but when it took a second swipe at her, with more force, the rifle went flying out of her hands. She tried to duck underneath the third strike but wasn't fast enough to avoid getting struck across her back when the alien pulled its swing back toward her a fourth time.

Boom and Charm combined their attack on the first alien, the two phaser blasts forcing it onto its knees before the other creature unleashed another and more focused beam from its staff that, instead of traveling in a straight line, actually zigzagged across the room to down both operatives.

Bensu appeared behind the alien out of seemingly nowhere and struck it hard in the back of its right leg. Even before it lost its balance, he snagged the staff out of its claw and swung it in a wide arc, hitting the other creature, still on its knees, across its hooded head with enough strength to cause it to fall over.

He managed to hit the first alien with the same sweeping motion of its staff, making it stumble further even if it ultimately managed to keep its balance. But now without a weapon, the alien faced Bensu wielding its own staff.

Michael watched as Bensu didn't hesitate and pushed the dull end of the rod right into the creature's left shoulder. It hadn't looked like a violent attack, and yet the alien uttered an ear-splitting shriek, grabbing the staff with its claws, trying to dislodge it. Bensu kept up until the alien sagged to the floor and only then let go of the rod.

Xylion stepped up to Michael, still carrying the unconscious alien they had captured, and yet still managed to reach out for him as well and pull him back to his feet. In the meantime, it was a real effort for Michael to try and ignore his aching body. "Through the fissure, now."

The team didn't need to be told twice. The two aliens had been downed but judging by the still prevalent clicking and popping noises all around them, many more were right behind them.

Bensu helped a couple of SMT operators on their feet, all of them injured or bruised, still, they managed to limp their way to the fissure, supporting each other's weight.

Michael watched them all disappear, one after the next. Xylion urged him to go next but Michael simply shoved the Vulcan and his captive into the fissure instead. Once he was satisfied that he was through, he turned around to see Benu still lingering behind. "Come on, let's go."

Bensu walked up toward him and the fissure but came to a sudden halt just a few steps in front of him.

"What's the matter?"

Bensu tried to turn around but it was too late.

Michael saw his eyes opening wide like saucers and then he heard the sound of something crushing through skin and bone until the sharp end of a staff came bursting through Bensu's torso.

Just over Bensu's shoulder, Michael could see a kneeling creature holding on to the other end of the staff.

The door opened wide and a dozen or so more cloaked aliens were streaming into the room, their collective clicking sounds urgent and overlapping and almost deafening now.

Michael reached for Bensu's shoulders and then stumbled backward, losing his balance but also pulling the impaled man with him as his body slipped off the staff lodged inside him.

Michael allowed gravity to do most of the work as he fell into the fissure behind him, refusing to let go of Bensu but already certain that any help awaiting them on the other side would come far too late to save him.

## 4

"What the hells were you thinking?" Tazla said, fuming, which had been an all too frequent mood of hers as of late when confronting her long-time friend. She couldn't deny a measure of anger at herself as well for not having anticipated such a foolhardy move from the infamously stubborn physician sooner, after all, he had all but declared his intentions to her. The truth was that she had been too busy dealing with Lif Culsten and his first contact with his high-ranking government agent aunt to focus on what Katanga might or might not do.

She had suspected something was the matter once she had noticed the suddenly evasive, almost guilt-ridden attitude of Louise Hopkins that had prompted her to try and locate Katanga unsuccessfully. The young woman may have been a naturally gifted engineer but she was a terrible liar and hadn't held up ten seconds under Tazla's questioning, quickly revealing that she had beamed the doctor into the city.

"I was thinking that somebody needed to take the initiative since nobody else was willing to act," he said defiantly, crossing his arms as he stared her down from where he stood.

"By disregarding orders and possibly putting our entire mission here into jeopardy?"

"Our mission here was already in jeopardy. The mission of trying to find a cure for this epidemic that is. Of course, you wouldn't have noticed with your entire focus dedicated to whatever cloak-and-dagger operation you're running behind the scenes."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said, trying to deflect with anger.

It didn't work. "Oh please, you can play the indignation card as much as you want. But you forget, I've known you – Dez, that is – for a long time and I knew when he was up to something. I could see it in his eyes as much as I can see it in yours now."

She took a few steps forward to shorten the distance between them and also to put some between her and her security entourage. "My indignation is not an act, Eli," she said through clenched teeth. As a former intelligence officer – a good one, she liked to think – she was naturally concerned that he had been able to intuit her more clandestine mission by nothing more than her body language. "You have crossed a line here."

"I can see that you think that," he said. "Clearly, I'm such a threat you've brought an entire security detail to apprehend me. Tell me, what was the plan? Are you going to have me shot and dragged back in irons?"

"You have no idea how appealing of an idea that sounds to me just about now," she said but then relented slightly and turned around to regard her escort. She closed in on the higher-ranking one of the two, the Caitian junior lieutenant. "T'Nerr, return to base, I'll handle this myself."

The Caitian nodded and he and his partner turned away and contacted the facility to be beamed back.

Tazla hadn't thought she needed backup to bring the Katanga back, but she had hoped that the show of force would drive home how serious she considered his transgression. She should've known better than that and that it wouldn't impress him much, and in truth, the additional Starfleet personnel only made the overall infraction of disregarding Administrator Chella's directives worse.

Once the security team had gone, she promptly whirled back around toward Katanga and quickly covered the distance between them, approaching him with long, determined strides, as if she was getting ready to throw down with him right here and now. She was satisfied to see him flinch briefly. "We're going back, too."

He regained his composure. "Not until I have some answers to my questions."

"Don't make me knock you on your ass," she seethed. "Because trust me, I'm very close to doing just that."

"If I had a slip of latinum for every time you've threatened me with that, I'd be rich enough to buy my own moon."

"I'm not playing around. You're in serious trouble."

"Am I? How about you start telling me why you think whatever the hell you are up to is more important than potentially saving millions of lives? Maybe I'm in trouble with you and the captain and whatever imbecilic Starfleet regulations you think I've violated, but my conscience is clear. I'm trying whatever I can to save these people. Can you say the same?"

She uttered a heavy sigh, clearly not in the mood of putting up with his self-righteousness. "Did it occur to you for even a minute that perhaps there are other and more significant stakes involved here than the fate of just one planet? Do you really think so little of me these days that you're convinced that I make such arbitrary decisions to keep you from saving lives? For once in your life, can you just take a step back, get off your moral high horse and consider that not everything that happens revolves around you and your direct sphere of influence."

"You have been a physician once," he shot back promptly. "Dare I say, a halfway decent one even? You should know what a slippery slope it is to start worrying about hypothetical scenarios and

big-picture ideas in that profession. We have sworn an oath, to help those who need it, no matter what. You and the captain can debate wide-reaching implications as long as the cows come home, but I don't have that luxury. I am not here for some sort of abstract agenda. I'm here to save lives, by any means necessary. No more and no less. I won't be a doctor who loses sight of that like some others have done throughout history. My name won't appear next to your Mengeles, Ishiis, or Mosets."

Tazla rolled her eyes. "Don't be so melodramatic."

"Then don't ask me to turn my back on the people that need my help."

She slowly took in their surroundings. This part of the Paradise Quarter was fairly isolated, filled with decrepit and mostly abandoned-looking warehouses. She had hardly seen another soul other than Katanga since she had beamed here. Ultimately her eyes once again landed on the intractable frown on his face. "What exactly makes you think you can find any answers here?"

His expression began to soften. "The witness I spoke to seems to think that ships regularly landed and took-off from within this building," he said and pointed at the warehouse behind him.

"So? That's hardly a smoking phaser."

"Maybe not, but the fact that this quarter also appears to be the epicenter of this disease might be. What if this thing wasn't created here? What if it was brought to this place from off-world? This could give us the best clue yet in trying to figure out where this disease originated."

Tazla uttered another sigh as she looked up at the building and the ladder leading up to the roof some fifteen stories above.

"We need to investigate this building and find out if there is a connection to the pandemic and these ships. I've already checked, there is no way to get into this building but we might be able to get access from the roof."

"Ten minutes," she said sternly. "Then we're out of here."

Katanga nodded and then turned to grab hold of the first rung of the ladder and began climbing.

Tazla looked after him with a scowl, then she followed him.

She could hear his exertion after just a few moments. "Are you sure you're up for this? You're not exactly –"

"Don't tell me I'm old, I know that already," he barked without slowing his pace. "Not everyone gets the luxury of being outfitted with a brand-new body when their old one begins to fall apart."

"For a physician, you have a surprisingly awful grasp on how the Trill work," she said.

"I know enough."

"And you might want to start taking care of yourself a little better. This whole excursion of yours was not just foolhardy but also incredibly dangerous on your own," she said while craning her neck to look up at him climbing above her.

"I can take care of myself just fine," he said between labored breaths.

"Yes, I've seen that poor reptilian you took care of in that alley. You're lucky that worked out in your favor but that could've been you lying on the ground, passed out, or worse."

"Less talking, more climbing," he said and Tazla guessed not just to deflect from the topic but also to save his quickly fading strength.

If she had been by herself, she would have likely managed to reach the roof within a couple of minutes, but with Katanga leading, it took them nearly twice that long to get to the top. When Tazla stepped off the ladder, he was already sitting down on a heating unit, desperately trying to catch his breath again.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Peachy."

She left it at that and began to look across the roof. There wasn't much to see, however. Save for a few, spread-out ventilation and heating devices, the roof was almost completely flat over its entire length. She certainly couldn't see any access points.

"There must be something here," he said after he had found his breath again and was beginning to slowly explore the wide space. "An entrance hatch or something like that."

But she shook her head. "There's nothing here, Eli. This is a waste of time."

"When exactly did you become this impatient?"

She turned on him. "Maybe it happened when one of my officers decided to ignore all orders and take off on his own into restricted areas, nearly getting himself killed in the process."

He shrugged, paying her little attention. Instead, he was staring at the roof by his feet "Maybe. But tell me, what is this?"

"What is what?" she said and joined him where he had slowly dropped onto his knees and was now carefully studying something on the roof. She quickly found what had aroused his interest. It looked like some sort of crease.

"This could be a way in," he said as he traced it with his fingers.

"Could be," she said. "But I doubt we'll be able to open it easily."

He looked up at her. "Why not?"

She pointed down the length of the roof that spanned nearly a hundred meters or so. He followed her outstretched arm and the crease that continued all the way down to the other end of the roof. He pulled himself back up onto his feet.

"Lend me your tricorder," she said.

He pulled the device from under his cloak and handed it over. "It's the medical version."

"I guessed as much. But if you know what you're doing, it can be more than that," she said as she flipped it over, opened a small flap, and began to reconfigure some of its settings. Once she was satisfied, she closed it up again, turned it back right side up, and activated the device. She began to scan her surroundings while slowly walking down the length of the floor groove. "Curious, I cannot scan the interior of the building, but this is definitely a retractable roof."

"And a big one. Which means ships have been coming here. Probably landing inside," he said.

She lifted the tricorder higher to get a better reading of the space above and around her. "I'm picking up significant trace elements of anti-gravitons and chemical residues consistent with thruster exhausts. Considering the high levels of saturation, I'd say this place has seen a lot of traffic. And not until that long ago."

"So I was right. There were vessels coming here. Plenty of them," he said.

"I'm also seeing evidence of what looks like ion trails."

"What does that mean?"

She looked up from the tricorder. "Impulse engines. And the only reason you would need a vessel with an impulse drive within the atmosphere is to leave a planetary orbit."

"We need to follow those trails."

She hated to admit it, but he was not wrong.

## 5

At Star's urging, Lif had accepted Garla's invitation to return to the city and visit her again after their initial meeting during which she had made clear that she had major designs to improve the status quo within the Star Alliance, even if she had been mum on the details.

The first officer had been intrigued and Lif had to admit that he was as well. She had hinted at bigger plans before, weeks earlier when he and Louise had visited her on the homeworld, but back then he hadn't given them much thought, had in fact been much more interested in leaving Krellon space behind as soon as possible instead, hopefully, for good. Things, of course, had not worked out that way.

This time, he had no choice but to be back here and he had resolved that if there was something that he could do to make his former home a better place for billions of people, he was at least going to try. Garla seemed to be the best chance of making this happen.

For his second visit, she met him not at her headquarters but right by the transporter station. In fact, she came up and greeted him the moment he had materialized. She wore a long dark coat and like most Krellonians lately, himself included, she wore a compact re-breather mask to protect herself from the pandemic sweeping this planet.

"Welcome, Liftu. I thought we'll take a little tour through the city today. Believe it or not, this is actually quite a mild day for Piquus."

Considering the temperature was well below what Culsten would have considered comfortable and the blustering winds were still whipping through the streets, that was indeed difficult to believe.

Outside the transporter station, Garla and Lif were joined by an entire cadre of her people. They were not uniformed security forces, but Lif could tell that they wore weapons underneath their coats, and each one of those serious-looking men and women appeared dangerous even without visible armaments.

“Piquis doesn’t strike me as a prime location for sightseeing,” he said as they set out down the street, walking side by side with Garla while her people formed a loose and inconspicuous perimeter around them.

She uttered a little laugh at that. “Certainly not. I know I would much rather be back in the Great River Lowlands. Hardly a day goes by that I don’t miss those majestic, emerald lands.”

“And yet you spent most of your days in these parts lately.”

She shot him a look, momentary suspicion dancing in her bright eyes. It vanished quickly. “As unappealing as this corner of the galaxy may be, it too is part of the Star Alliance. It may not be as significant as the core worlds but we cannot forsake it or its people because of its diminished role.”

“The plans you spoke of,” Lif said. “Are they tied to this place?”

She didn’t answer straight away as they continued to walk down the packed streets near the center of the city where Krellonians urgently went about their business.

“My plans will change everything, Liftu. They’ll transform not just this little speck but the entire Alliance.”

Before he could ask any more questions, he noticed an increasing commotion up ahead. People had begun to move noticeably faster and away from the area ahead.

Garla continued as if she hadn’t noticed. “This may not be the kind of glorious world our esteemed leaders like to discuss in the hallowed chambers of the Central Council or at parties catering to the rich and powerful, but it is a microcosm of the state the entire Alliance finds itself currently. What is happening here is happening everywhere across Krellon space.”

“Maybe,” he said, trying to get a better view of what was happening up ahead, as more and more people were beginning to flee the area, even as they still continued toward it. “I can’t believe

though that this plague is helping things. Particularly if the rumors are true that the Outlanders are behind it.”

Garla stopped suddenly when she spotted a petite Kridrip woman in cheap and tattered clothing, a small child clinging to her chest, both looking around with anxiety and concern.

As far as Lif could tell, those two were among the very few Outlanders among the now rapidly thinning crowd here at the center of the city.

Garla had quickly grabbed the young woman by her arm, towering far above her, the Kridrip looked up at Garla with wide, fearful eyes. “This is not a good place for you to be right now,” she said to her with a benign smile. She handed the woman some local currency. “Take this and head back that way. Keep going and don't stop until you are out of the area.”

The woman took what she was given gratefully and then quickly followed Garla's instructions.

Lif considered his aunt. “What's happening?”

She looked after the escaping Kridrip and her child a moment longer before turning back to him. “What has been happening here and in places like these all across the Alliance with far too much frequency in recent years.”

Lif looked back toward the commotion ahead and found that the crowd had cleared enough to reveal a large group of Outlanders, made up of humanoids, reptilians, lupines, and even a few ursine, clashing with local security forces.

It wasn't a pretty sight. It was violent on both sides and already several vehicles had been damaged, one had just been engulfed in flames. The security forces had quickly switched to deadly force, firing openly into the Outlander crowd that easily outnumbered them three to one. The Outlanders for their part showed little constraint either, using energy weapons and other more makeshift weapons like clubs and stones and anything else that could be thrown or swung against the authorities.

Lif felt like the entire thing was moving into their directly rather quickly. “I don't think we should be here either.”

“Agreed,” said Garla, and pointed at a side street. “We might be able to get out of their way.”

Their team promptly slipped into the smaller road to try and flee the swath of chaos and destruction that was heading in their direction.

“This is insanity,” said Lif, slightly out of breath after they had dashed for their escape route. “I know there have been some incidents on the homeworld but when did it become this bad?”

“It’s been bad for a long time, Liftu. The signs were all there even before you left, your parents just did a very good job to isolate you from all of this.”

“But I don’t understand. The laws changed years ago. Things shouldn’t be like this anymore.”

Garla uttered a little, humorless laugh as they made their way down the road, the sounds of battle slowly receding behind them. “Changing laws is easy compared to changing the way people feel and think. We’ve kept the Outlanders as slaves for centuries, treated them no better than property. For a century after that, they had no rights to speak of and even today they are second-class citizens at best, most of them poor, many had turned to crime for a lack of opportunities. All that builds up resentment that over time turns into a powder keg.”

“You think it will happen here, don’t you?” he said. “You think it will blow up right here on Piquus.”

“Not if I can help it.”

Almost as if out of nowhere, a dozen or so Outlanders, led by a couple of vicious and angry-looking lupines came streaming out of an alley and bearing down on Garla and her team, having apparently picked up the scent of the Krellonian group. They came at them screaming, shouting, and hissing.

“That’s not good,” Garla said dryly and then urged her people to head them off, even if it was clear that they were entirely outmanned by the wave of the angry mob rushing toward them.

She reached into her coat and pulled out a phaser, thrusting it into Lif’s hand before he could even object. “Go, that way,” she said and pointed in the direction they had been headed. “Take a left and a right, that should take you back toward the Eye building. It’ll be secure. We’ll hold them off. Hurry.” She practically shoved him forward before she pulled out what looked like a baton from her coat and followed her men to confront the Outlanders.

Lif didn't consider himself a coward but Garla had shoved him so hard, his momentum was already moving him away from the clash and he decided to keep going. While he may have been a fellow Krellonian, he also understood that he was here, essentially as a Starfleet officer, and as such he had to do whatever he could to try and stay out of strictly internal affairs. Star had made this very clear to him before he had set out to meet with Garla.

It couldn't get any more internal than a civil war. From everything he had seen so far, this seemed to be exactly what was happening here. And if it wasn't a full-blown war yet, it certainly had all the hallmarks of the beginnings of one.

Lif joined a throng of others, both Krellonians and also a few Outlanders who were running away from the chaos that was beginning to spread out behind them. He did his best to follow Garla's instructions, which had seemed simple enough, but the pushing and shoving of the people around him made it a challenge to stay orientated in this unfamiliar city, gusts of wind routinely flared up and forced him the wrong way until he found himself totally lost.

He stumbled into some sort of yard, surrounded on all sides by high and unscalable walls. It was eerily quiet here, even the persistent winds didn't seem to reach this little, peaceful refuge.

A rare sight for this rather barren planet, the yard contained a small but lush green garden, with a handful of trees, a patch of grass, and a little pond nestled right at its center.

Lif took a deep breath, seemingly for the first time since this sudden flare of violence had erupted, and then took a step toward this unexpected oasis that stood in such stark contrast to everything he had seen on this planet so far.

The roar behind him shattered the momentary tranquility he had found. He whirled around to come face to face with a massive, dark-furred Buoth. The ursine was at least two heads taller than him, and growling madly as he approached.

"Wait, hold on, I'm not your enemy," he said desperately, holding up one arm in the Outlander's direction but perhaps for a moment forgetting that he was still holding Garla's phaser in the other.

The Buoth swung a paw his way and Lif felt his feet lifting off the ground as he went flying from the force of the impact, only to land in the shallow pond.

The shock of the cold water made him lurch back up, ignoring the pain in his burning shoulder. He slipped on the slick stones and fell back into the watery surface. The Buoth in the meantime was barreling his way, felling a couple of smaller trees in the process that snapped almost like twigs as he bore down on him.

He had no idea where the phaser had gone and could do nothing when he felt a firm grip on his ankle, the massive Outlander easily pulling him out of the water only to toss him around like a ragdoll.

Lif grunted in pain when his back hit the trunk of one of the larger trees. He slipped out of the Buoth's grip and crashed into one of the far walls.

Krellonian bones, thankfully, were particularly dense, and had he been any other humanoid, the impact against the stonewall may have broken his back. His tough physiology didn't prevent him, however, to feel practically every inch of his body aching with terrible pain.

Through blurry eyes he could see that the ursine was not yet done, from the raving expression on his face, he guessed he wouldn't be until he had torn him limb from limb.

Lif spotted the phaser by a tree just behind the now approaching Outlander who was in the process of raising both arms, likely planning to bring down the razor-sharp claws on the top of his paws to dissect him from head to toe.

Remembering his Starfleet close-combat training that Nora Laas had insisted all officers take part in on a weekly basis, he ducked and rolled forward, right underneath the approaching giant, bear-like creature that was too slow to stop him.

Lif hit the tree hard but didn't let that stop him. He frantically reached for the phaser and then whipped around, his back leaning against the trunk to steady him.

The Buoth was getting ready to leap once more, probably squashing him and the tree behind him both in the process.

Clutching the weapon with both hands in front of him, he was unfamiliar with its design but thankfully the trigger was exactly where he would have expected it.

The bright crimson beam struck the ursine right in the head and burned a perfect hole clean through his skull as well as leaving a scorch mark on the wall behind him.

His eyes went wide for only a heartbeat before they glazed over and the beast dropped onto the ground with a loud thud so powerful it caused the tree behind Lif to shake.

Lif remained frozen in place, the weapon still pointed forward at an opponent that was no longer a threat, his soaking wet and sore body trembling all over. He wasn't entirely sure how long he had remained that way until he heard the approaching voices behind him.

It was Garla who reached him first, taking a knee next to him and gently lowering the weapon until she took it out of his hands completely. "Are you injured?"

But Lif just stared at the heap of Buoth just a few meters in front of him, its empty eyes looking right through him. "Is he ... is he dead?" It didn't occur to him until later that considering the prominent hole in the Outlander's head, the question had been rather redundant.

Garla clearly didn't need to check. "Let's get you out of here."

## 6

The transition back into normal space was nearly as disorientating as stepping into subspace. Falling backward into the fissure, he had felt weightless for a moment just before he had landed hard onto the deck back on *Eagle*. The bright overhead lighting and the much sharper and more defined shapes all around him were so dramatically different from what he had barely just gotten used to in subspace, his eyes burned with stabbing pain and began to tear up, his lungs too, couldn't immediately handle the much higher concentration of oxygen and nitrogen they were suddenly asked to take in again, and Michael felt as if he was about to drown in air.

He desperately fumbled with the armband on his personal shield to try and reconfigure it for his new surroundings or even deactivate it. When he failed to get the desired results, he simply ripped the entire armband away, causing the shield to instantly fizzle out and slowly begin the transition back to normalcy for his senses.

Michael's relief was short-lived.

The fissure in front of him was literally spitting out lightning that looked eerily familiar to the weapon's fire the aliens had employed against them. They were still shooting, into the fissure and right into normal space.

The twisting beams crackled over his head and slammed into the bulkheads and ceiling of the corridor, leaving dark scorch marks behind. They also slammed into the force fields that still surrounded the gateway, and that were holding for now.

Michael reached for his phaser and returned fire, right into the maelstrom that was the angry, pulsating fissure, hoping he would hit anything within it.

He heard the force fields being dropped behind him and looking back he could see that Leva had smartly stationed armed security personnel down the corridor who now quickly followed the captain's example and opened fire at the anomaly as well.

Unfortunately, it also made them vulnerable to the erratic lightning-like energy blasts, and a snaking discharge clipped one security officer, causing her to drop and struck another in the chest, slamming him hard into the bulkhead.

Michael looked over to see Diamond, the SMT team leader, starting to get back around herself after having removed her armband and he noticed the cylindrical devices attached to her belt. "Grenades, now!"

Diamond didn't hesitate, unclipped the explosives, and chucked them into the fissure, one after the other.

There were no explosions. At least none that Michael could see or hear.

Instead, the entire anomaly erupted with sudden bright light, and with such intensity, he had to shield his eyes and turn his head. It still blinded him.

A silent shockwave followed that flattened him to the deck plates. Once the pulse had washed over him and his vision was

slowly returning, he pulled himself up and looked back toward the fissure into subspace.

It was gone. Except for the smoldering bulkheads where the alien energy blasts had left their marks, there were no signs at all that the portal had ever existed in the first place.

Michael clambered to his feet, losing his balance on the first attempt, but then managed to get upright on the second. He looked back at Diamond who was pulling herself up as well. "Report. Injuries?"

"Nothing but our pride," said Boom, the Andorian, as he sat up against the bulkhead holding his right arm.

Michael was sure that was an understatement. Pretty much every operative seemed to have been wounded at least to a minor degree, even if all of them remained conscious.

Further back he could see the two security specialists who had been hit, but they were already being seen to by their fellow colleagues, and from what he could determine their injuries were not fatal either.

"Captain."

Michael turned upon hearing Xylion's voice. He was relieved to find the Vulcan in one piece as well but his concern appeared to be focused on the alien he had managed to bring back through the gateway.

The creature was lying flat on its back and had started convulsing heavily, flopping around not unlike a fish out of water. Michael figured the analogy was probably fairly close.

"I do not believe it will survive for long under these conditions," Xylion said.

It was only then that Michael spotted the final member of their team. Bensu was on his side, motionless against the bulkhead. In all the confusion he had almost forgotten that it had been Bensu who had allowed them to escape in the first instance, and also that he had suffered the most grievous injury when he had been impaled by one of the aliens' weapons.

Ivory got to Bensu first, took a knee beside him, and gently turned him on his back.

Michael joined her a moment later, noticing the gaping wound on Bensus's chest, his shirt drenched in dark green blood, his eyes empty and staring at nothing.

Ivory seemed to be looking for a pulse but found nothing. She looked up at him and slowly shook her head.

Michael tapped his combadge. "Owens to transporter room two, medical emergency. Lock on to Mister Bensus's combadge and beam him directly to sickbay."

Moments later Bensus dematerialized in a haze of blue light.

Michael had seen more than enough dead bodies during his career to know that there was little hope left for the enigmatic bartender who had so surprisingly turned out to be not just knowledgeable about the aliens they had faced, but also impressively able to oppose them and give him and his team a chance to escape subspace. He had given his life for them.

"Sir, we need to take action now. I recommend we beam the alien into a containment area that can simulate the atmospheric conditions similar to the ones we found in subspace."

Michael turned back to Xylion who was now kneeling above the still convulsing creature and for just a brief moment he marveled at his ability to be so entirely detached after witnessing the death of what by all accounts had been one of his closest friends. Of course, he would not have expected anything different from the Vulcan and also quickly understood that Xylion's priorities were absolutely correct. They had gone through too much to lose the only tangible evidence they had been able to recover from their deadly excursion into subspace now.

"Set up a containment area in cargo bay two and beam it there."

Xylion offered a small nod in acknowledgment and began to give orders to the bridge to create the correct conditions at the other end.

Several medics came jogging down the corridor with medkits and other supplies to tend to the wounded and Michael allowed one of them to look him over as well as he sat back down on the floor with his back against the bulkhead, thankful for a chance to rest his aching body for a moment.

While the medic worked, he kept his eyes on the creature as it was finally beamed away, still convulsing.

He could only hope that they had not paid too high a price to obtain it. If Jarik had been right about their intentions, if these subspace aliens were on the cusp of leading an invasion, then Bensusan's sacrifice may have been well worth it in the end.

But too many questions remained unanswered, and doubt had been Michael's constant companion ever since this entire mission had first begun.

## 7

"I didn't have a choice. It was either me or him at that moment. If I hadn't shot him when I did, if I had hesitated for only a moment, you'd still be scraping pieces of me from that wall."

Lif was sitting on his bunk, back on the *Nebuchadnezzar*, pushed all the way back, with his knees up against his chest, as he was reliving the traumatic experience back in the city just a few hours earlier when he had come face to face with an enraged Outlander.

Louise Hopkins stood by the bulkhead opposite him, considering him carefully. "Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

He glared up at her. "You weren't there. You didn't see that Buoth's rage-filled eyes the way I did. There was going to be no reasoning with it. No stopping it."

Louise shook her head. "I'm not saying I don't believe you, Lif. It just doesn't sound like you're entirely confident about what happened."

"Of course, I'm not," he snapped at her. "I killed somebody today. And not an enemy Jem'Hadar or a Cardassian soldier in battle. Not some faceless opponent on another ship. But another person, right in front of me. A person with whom I had no quarrel with."

"He clearly had quarrel with you."

He uttered a heavy sigh. "But that's just it, he shouldn't have. I wasn't there to hurt him. I had no interest whatsoever in getting involved with his issues."

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Maybe it was enough that you're Krellonian. Maybe in his eyes that automatically made you the enemy."

"I don't even know if he was part of the riot. For all I know I could have been intruding on his home. Maybe that garden was his private refuge I stumbled upon and he thought I was there to hurt him."

"What were you doing there anyway?"

Lif looked back at her. "I was trying to get away from the riot."

She shook her head. "No, I get that. I mean why were you anywhere near the riot in the first place?"

He considered that for a moment. "Garla wanted to show me the city."

"During a period of heightened civil unrest? While a pandemic is sweeping this planet? That seems like an odd time for a sightseeing tour."

Lif climbed out of his bulk to face her. "What exactly are you implying?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Just that it is a little strange that she would put you in this kind of position to begin with, don't you think?"

The inference made him angry. "You were the one who told me to seek her out and try and make a difference. You wanted me to do this. And now you're telling me that I shouldn't have?"

"I'm just saying to be more careful."

"Thanks, I'll try to remember that," he said and began to head toward the door of the small cabin. "I should be making my report to Commander Star."

"She's not around."

He stopped and turned to look at her again. "Where is she?"

"I'm not entirely sure."

Lif immediately knew that she was holding something back and he skewered her with a look that told her as much.

She uttered a sigh. "Doctor Katanga went into the city to follow up on a lead regarding the outbreak of the plague. Star found out and went after him. They haven't returned yet."

It wasn't difficult to tell that there was more to that story but for now, Lif decided he had more important things to worry about. "Who's in charge while she's gone?"

"Star left Nora in command in her absence."

"Fine. Just go tell her what happened."

"Where are you going?"

"I need to go see Garla again."

She took a step after him. "Wait, you're going back?"

"I thought you'd be happy about that. You were right, after all. Something needs to be done before the entire Star Alliance rips itself apart. It might all start right here. So far, Garla seems to be the only person who is willing to do something about it. I need to find out what that is and help her if I can," he said and then left the cabin to return to the transporter.

Lif arrived back in the city with more than a little trepidation.

Signs of the riot from the previous day were everywhere he looked, from the trash-strewn streets, the burned-out hulks of cargo skimmers, and the visible damage to buildings and storefronts. Security was out in full force, heavily-armed teams were patrolling the streets and were seemingly posted to every corner. Civilian traffic was light compared to what it had been the day before, and Lif couldn't make out a single Outlander amongst them.

He was greeted at the transporter by another armed team, this one identifying itself as working for Garla. Differently from the last time he had run into her men, these were clearly uniformed agents of the Eye, which helped speed them along the many security checkpoints they had to pass through.

Once inside her headquarters, it was Tenn, her aunt's Kridrip assistant who escorted him to the upper floors.

"That was quite a riot yesterday," Lif said in the elevator after nothing but silence had passed between them, Tenn once again turning out to be a terrible conversationalist.

He simply regarded him with his large eyes.

"Do you know how many people were hurt?"

"Too many," he said and then looked away.

Lif wasn't sure if the man blamed him for the death of a fellow Outlander or if he was just naturally aloof.

"Are these riots happening frequently here?"

“Frequently enough.”

Lif nodded. Clearly, he wouldn't get any more information out of that man.

The elevator stopped but Tenn didn't make a move. After an awkward moment had passed, Lif decided to head off alone. The other man spoke up just before he had reached the doors.

“Let's make one thing perfectly clear,” he said sharply. “I don't trust you. And I don't think the Sentinel should trust you either, even if you are related to her.”

He whirled around to face the man who was now staring him down.

“You have no business being here. You've turned your back on the Star Alliance a long time ago.”

Lif couldn't really disagree with his point and yet he felt a fit of sudden anger rise within him. “And have you shared those feelings with Garla yet?”

He hesitated a moment, then shook his head slightly, diverting his eyes. “It is not my place to advise the Sentinel on her business.”

“I'm glad to hear that. Now, why don't you remember your place, and take me to her?” He wasn't proud of the tone in his voice, or even of the words coming over his lips, and for a brief moment, he wondered if he had always talked to Outlanders this way without even having noticed it before. He liked to think that it was just this particularly recalcitrant man who had gotten the worst out of him.

He nodded. “Yes. I'll do that. And I'll also be keeping my eyes on you.”

“If nothing else, that should be part of your job.”

They exchanged a brief, poisonous glare before Tenn led Lif out of the lift and toward Garla's spacious office.

Once inside she quickly left her chair and walked around her desk to greet Lif. “I'm glad you came back.”

He nodded at her.

“That would be all, Tenn, thank you.”

But Tenn stayed, which caused an irritated look to cross her features. “Is there a problem?”

He quickly looked at her as if embarrassed by his hesitation. “No. No problem at all, Sentinel. I'll be right outside if you need me,” he said and then promptly left the office.

Garla looked after him with a puzzled expression. "I think these latest events are starting to take a toll on him. Can't say I blame him."

Lif said nothing as he stepped up to the large, floor-high windows of her office. Located on the sixtieth floor of the building, the windows gave him a great view of the city and the surrounding area. While it was certainly not the tallest building in the city, he had an almost unobstructed view of the chaos that had been created by the riot that had clearly spread much wider than he had first thought.

She joined him. "Not a pretty sight, is it?"

He shook his head.

"It's a real shame. Not that this city – this entire planet – is much to look at in the first place, but the riot killed fifty people on both sides and injured a few hundred more. Not the kind of thing we need right now."

"You knew this was going to happen, didn't you?"

She remained silent as they both kept their eyes on the ant-like people and tiny vehicles below, hurrying back and forth in an effort to try and clean up the damage that had been done.

"I had my suspicions."

He turned away from the window to look at her statuesque profile.

"Suspicions? Please, you are a Sentinel of the Eye of Krellon. You've been a spy since I've been a child. Gathering and analyzing intelligence is what you do. You knew exactly what to expect."

"That doesn't mean that I could've stopped it."

"But you had no qualms to put me right into the middle of it all," he said angrily. "If you hadn't, I would never have been in a position where I had to kill that Buoth."

She turned to look at him and nodded slowly. "You are right. I did need you to see how bad things had gotten. I had to make you understand the enormous danger we are facing," she said and shook her head. "But I didn't mean to put you into that position. This time my intelligence wasn't as solid as I had expected and the riot spread much faster and wider than anticipated. If it hadn't, you should have been fine."

"Well, I wasn't."

Garla walked back to her desk. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry about what happened to you, I truly am. But the truth is that what you experienced has become the norm for many of us who live here. On Piquis and beyond. At this pace, a civil war is going to be inevitable and it will tear the Alliance apart," she said as she took her chair again.

Lif followed her. "What can we do to stop it?"

She shook her head sadly. "We have to change as a people, Lif. We have to, for once and for all, accept our mistakes and the terrible injustices we have collectively been responsible for, either by partaking in them directly or by enabling others and turn a blind eye to what we all knew was happening."

"The Great Shame," Lif said quietly.

"Yes. But it's not enough, you see. We can't just label our history and try to move on from it as if it never happened. It happened, Lif, our forefathers set out into the galaxy, believing themselves to be so far superior to every race they came across, they believed they possessed a mandate from the Infallible Creator himself to conquer and subjugate them all. That dark legacy will stay with us for all time."

"Then how do you reconcile this? How do you move forward from all that pain and suffering?"

"You don't."

He shot her a quizzical look. "I don't think I understand."

"It's really quite simple, Lif. Some stains run too deep to ever be erased. Some wrongs simply cannot be made right again. Our people, the Krellonians and the Outlanders will never be able to come together, our differences are too vast and our shared history is built on a foundation that is far too damaged to allow to build upon."

Lif wasn't sure what she was saying. "What then are you proposing?"

She looked passed him and back toward the windows before she spoke again. "I call it a Stand-Alone Society. Or rather, societies," she said and then looked Lif right in the eye again. "At this point, it is our only chance to not just save ourselves but the Outlanders as well." She stood up again. "We need to go it alone, Lif. It's the only way forward."

Following the plasma trail left behind by unknown vessels Tazla Star had discovered, without anybody taking notice, was not a simple proposition. First and foremost, much of the air and orbital space around and above the major population centers was carefully monitored by the authorities as would have been expected by any modern society. Taking off in a shuttle and taking it into orbit would have drawn immediate and unwanted attention, particularly since the Starfleet contingent on Piquis had been given strict restrictions regarding their allowed movements.

But something else had occurred to Tazla. Piquis itself had been under a stringent quarantine protocol that not only predated their arrival on this world but judging from the decay rate of those ion trails, also predated the telltale signs of orbital traffic they had uncovered in the Paradise District.

This seemed to imply that whoever had piloted those vessels would have had to contend with the same problems they were facing now, trying to head into orbit undetected by any ground-based observatories. Save for several satellites, Piquis did not possess any orbital platforms.

Any vessel leaving the surface may have been able to fool initial scans by running on low-energy mode, perhaps even using some basic stealth technology, but even that would only get a ship that far before it would be detected by sensors constantly searching the skies in order to enforce the quarantine.

The answer to the riddle became obvious once Tazla managed to figure out where the plasma trails were leading initially. Not directly into orbit, as she had first expected, but toward the planet's northern magnetic pole, located just a few hundred kilometers from the city. The overlapping trails spoke of significant traffic over the last few weeks, perhaps even months, the ship's always staying low to the surface, following a course to avoid the few spread-out population centers and taking advantage, no doubt, of the dark Piquis nights.

Since the ion signatures were already decaying rapidly, Tazla and Elijah had wasted little time taking to the *Emerson*, one of the half-dozen shuttles *Eagle* had left behind, and then using the cover of darkness to set out to follow the plasma trails toward the planet's northern pole.

Once they had reached the arctic region, Tazla realized that her assumption had been absolutely correct, the trails lead straight up into orbit from here, the magnetic interference in the area likely hiding any ships entering or leaving the atmosphere.

The plasma wakes led away from the planet and deeper into the Piquis system, toward the once mineral-rich asteroid belt that as far as Tazla was aware, from the admittedly limited intelligence they had been able to gather, had long since been mined to depletion.

"This doesn't make any sense," Elijah said, sitting to Star's right in the shuttle's cockpit while the Trill piloted the vessel. "Why would anyone introduce a virus to Piquis from somewhere as close as the asteroid belt?"

"There must be more to this," she said while she concentrated on flying the compact *type-eight* shuttle. "The multiple trails clearly hint at continuous traffic between the city and the asteroid belt."

Elijah nodded. "My witness seemed to indicate a frequency of travel as well."

"In which case, this isn't necessarily just about introducing a virus to Piquis," she said and looked at him. "Think about it, these vessels continued to operate even after the quarantine, meaning long after the virus was first introduced to the planet, and they've only stopped recently."

"If at all," said Eli. "For all we know they may have just changed their base of operations on Piquis."

She offered him a short nod. "Whatever is going on here, I'm starting to think it might be bigger than just a disease."

He offered her a grin, a rare sight on his features over the last few weeks.

"What's got you so amused all of a sudden?"

"Oh, nothing. Just Dez and Eli back in action, solving the mysteries of the universe. Just like the good old days."

She shook her head as she focused back on her console. "You have a fundamentally distorted view of our past endeavors."

"I don't know, it strikes me that we did some good work back then. After all, one of the things that came out of our adventures was the creation of MAAP," he said before his face darkened once more. "Then you got that new, curvy body of yours and now it's all about orders and politics, instead of the common good like it used to be."

She swiveled her chair sideways to face him, trying hard to keep her rising irritation in check. "All right, let's get this over with for once and for all, shall we?"

"This is hardly the place or the time," he said without making eye contact.

Taz turned back to her controls but only to bring the shuttle to a full stop, after which she turned right back to him, determined not to go one inch further until they'd had a long overdue talk. "We're doing this now," she said with finality.

He sighed and moved his own chair to face her. "Very well."

"I am really getting sick and tired of your constant accusations that I somehow lost all compassion for other people since my days as Dezwin. First and foremost, let's get one thing perfectly straight. Yes, you're right that I'm not Dezwin anymore. I fondly carry all his thoughts and memories inside me, but I am my own person and have been ever since I was born and even after I joined with Star. I am the first to admit that I have made several bad decisions since my joining, some might even argue, disastrous ones, but I've worked hard over the last few years to regain the respect and trust of the people I work with. And the fact that I have lost yours – the man I possibly respect and trust the most – has hurt me a great deal. And I don't think it's entirely fair."

"Was it fair for you to take it upon yourself and make decisions on my behalf after you knew precisely that I would not agree with them?" he said, crossing his arms defiantly in front of his chest.

"Fair? No, perhaps not. But Eli, you have to appreciate that you're working within a command structure now. A command structure in which I outrank you and on occasions have to make decisions that you may not like. If you have difficulties acclimating to working in this manner, perhaps you should not have volunteered for starship duty again."

"This isn't about following orders, and you know that. You made a unilateral decision about something I should have had a say

in and you chose to ignore that. I know the years after you became Tazla Star were tough for you and that you still suffer from it. Hell, I've been the one helping you get you off that Syndicate poison you were addicted to, but I just cannot stand it when people take it upon themselves to make so-called hard decisions consequences be damned, and then justify them by quoting some sort of hypothetical greater good."

She massaged her temples, trying to stave off a headache. "It was a gods-damned apology, Eli. A few meaningless words in a statement to a half-senile head of state holding a stupid grudge."

"It's the principle, Taz. Maybe it's just a few words today, but what about tomorrow? Tomorrow it might be more than words, once more justified in the name of some ethically questionable concept. What is it the Vulcans like to say? 'The good of the many, outweighs the good of the few'? That is a dangerous precedent to set and I don't want to be a party to it. And certainly not as a tool for you to resurrect your career," he said, staring her right in the eye as he spoke.

"And that," she said and pointed at him, "is complete nonsense. The notion that I did any of that for my own personal gain. Honestly, that hurts me the most, that you would have such a low opinion of me. Yes, I did it because there was a greater good to be achieved, but I would have done it regardless of how it would have affected my standing with the captain or even within Starfleet itself. Because it was the right thing to do at the time."

The two old friends glowered at each other for a moment.

It was Elijah who began to nod first. "Okay."

She shot him a quizzical look. "Okay?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean, okay?"

"Just that."

Her look darkened noticeably. "We're good?"

He nodded. "Yes, we're good."

This in itself did not appease her at all, if anything it only made her madder. "What the hells, Eli? All the anger and righteous indignation you've been throwing my way over the last few weeks, making it a nightmare to even try to talk to you, and now, suddenly, it's all forgotten? What was all this about then?"

He turned to face his controls again. "I just needed to hear you say it."

"Say what?"

"That you were convinced that it was the right thing to do on its own merits. That you didn't act this way because others expected you to. I needed to know that you had conviction of your beliefs."

"Godsdamned it, you could have just asked."

He shrugged.

She just shook her head and turned to the flight controls, putting the shuttle back in motion toward the asteroid belt. "You know what, Eli? You're an old, pigheaded son-of-a-bitch sometimes and a real pain in my backside."

He offered her a brief smile over his shoulder. "Just the type to keep you honest."

Before she could consider this sudden development in her interpersonal relationship with Elijah Katanga, she noticed him leaning closer to the forward-facing viewport, his eyes noticeably squinting. "What in the blazes is that?"

She followed his gaze until she found what had startled him so. They were heading deeper into the dense asteroid belt, filled with thousands of rocks of all sizes, most of which posed no danger to the shuttle and its shields. Eli had fixed his attention on one of the bigger ones, not quite the size of a small moon, but multiple times larger than a major starship.

It didn't take her long to realize why it had drawn his notice. Almost half of the large rock was outright missing.

She glanced down at her instruments to run a scan. "There's a lot of background radiation in this asteroid field and the shuttle's sensors are not powerful enough to cut through it."

"Don't need sensors to tell me that there's something very wrong with that asteroid," he said. "And that they're usually not hollow."

"Hollow?" she said and looked back up and out of the viewport. Indeed, upon closer inspection, she realized that he was right. A clearly artificial interior was visible where the outer mantle of the asteroid had presumably shed off and was now exposed to the vacuum of space. "Good eyes."

"Other parts of me might be slowing down, but my vision is

still excellent, thank you very much," he said and regarded her with a frown.

She turned back to her console. "I think that asteroid is the main source of the radiation I'm registering. There are also signs of significant subspace disruptions in the area. Odd."

"What?"

She shook her head. "The radiation. It looks familiar. I'm sure I've seen the pattern before but I cannot quite put my finger on it."

"Let's go over there and have a look."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

But Elijah was not going to take no for an answer. "Dez, we've come this far, no point in turning back now. The answers we are looking for are over there," he said and pointed out of the viewport. "Let's go get them."

She hesitated for a moment but perhaps what finally won her over was not the strength of his argument, but the fact that he had reverted back to calling her by her former host's name, which she had always considered a sign of endearment and one he had mostly abandoned over the last few weeks.

She glanced back at her board. "It won't be easy," she said. "There is a lot of radiation and I don't think we can trust transporters. We would need to go EVA."

"Suits me just fine," he said and stood to get ready to leave the shuttle.

It took Tazla a few minutes to get the shuttle close enough to the asteroid to attempt boarding the exposed internal areas. She also spotted something that looked like a large landing bay but she ruled out the possibility of trying to set down the shuttle within the asteroid itself due to a total lack of gravity and the large amounts of debris littering the deck. Instead, she backed up the small vessel as close as possible to the asteroid base and then lowered the back ramp after ensuring the force field protecting the ship's interior pressure and atmosphere was at full strength.

By the time she had locked down the controls and left her chair, Elijah had already retrieved two white and red environmental suits.

Tazla and Katanga quickly stripped out of their uniforms, pulled on the formfitting undersuits, and then helped each other into

the hard-shell EV suits. Elijah struggled a little bit with getting the bulky helmet sealed in place at first.

"Is this a good time to check when you were last certified for extra-vehicular activity?" she asked as she helped him with the helmet, referring to the standard training process every Starfleet officer had to complete at regular intervals. At least in theory. Like many things in Starfleet, seniority could get one out of several unpleasant tasks.

"Let's just say that I've likely done more of those in one lifetime than you had to do in all of yours," he said impatiently.

She wasn't quite sure she agreed with that and it had also not answered her question. She made a mental note to check the records once they were back on *Eagle*.

"I swear they make these blasted things tighter every few years on purpose," he said grumbling once the suit was fully sealed. "God forbid anyone should ever be comfortable while taking a stroll through the vacuum of space."

"The more likely story is that you've gained some weight."

"Nonsense."

She just smirked as she connected a tether to the shuttle and then attached it to both their suits. "Just stick close to me. I'd rather not lose you out there, especially now since we're such good buddies again," she said over their helmet comms.

She stepped out of the force field and onto the ramp extending into nothingness first and then waited for Eli to follow her with ginger steps. "Stand by to deactivate your magnetic boots. I'll use my thrusters to get us over there, you just hang on."

"By all means, lead the way."

And so she did. She turned off the boots, immediately feeling herself becoming weightless, and then glanced over to Eli who quickly followed suit. Then she activated her thrusters and gave them both a gentle burst toward the asteroid just a few hundred meters in front of them.

The trickiest bit was dodging the debris and asteroid fragments swirling all across their path. Clearly whatever had happened to the asteroid had not been on purpose and there was enough evidence to suggest that the interior areas had experienced an explosive decompression, which meant that if the base had been staffed at the

time, it would have been very likely that the incident had led to multiple casualties.

"This looks bad," he said.

She nodded inside her helmet. "I don't think they saw this coming."

Tazla dodged and redirected a few, large storage containers in their path, not worrying too much about smaller items that were becoming more numerous as they got closer, such as various handheld tools, devices, and even some articles of random clothing.

She sat down gently on the outer edge of a large room that was fully exposed to the vacuum and reactivated her boots. A moment later she looked on as Eli did the same. They both reached for their tricorders and began scanning.

"Radiation is definitely more pronounced here."

"I see it, too," he said. "I would have to take more readings but I'd bet my bottom dollar that this radiation would wreak havoc on biological organisms if not properly shielded."

She turned to look at him. "Enough to cause a rapid degradation of the immune system?"

"Perhaps. As I said, I'll need more data."

She nodded and then sat out deeper into the room, taking short, small steps and making sure that Elijah stayed close at her side.

The further they stepped into the facility the more obvious it became that whatever had happened to the station had happened recently. "Judging by the decay rate of the radiation, I'd guess this happened two, maybe three weeks ago," said Tazla.

"And yet the plasma trails we have been following here are much more recent."

She had considered that herself. For now, she had no explanation for that discrepancy.

"What is this over here?" said Elijah and then headed toward several heavy doors arranged in a row. One of the doors had ripped away from the wall and was nowhere in sight.

Tazla followed him to find a large but featureless and empty room behind the missing door. The walls of the room were scorched black as if something very powerful had burned itself out within it, perhaps even blown that heavy door off its hinges.

"I'm reading trace materials of boronite and painite here. Those are some seriously rare minerals."

"And boron-based, if I'm not mistaken."

She turned to look at him. "Yes. Why is that important?"

"Boron is mostly harmless to many humanoid species but it can be very dangerous to insectoids."

Tazla followed. "And Krellonians have genetic similarities to insectoids from their early evolutionary development. Significant exposure to high levels of boron could have caused the Krellonian metabolism to break down rapidly."

"More than that, I wager. If our theory is correct, not only would significant exposure have led to a breakdown of biological functions, it may even have created the virus itself, incubated within those who were initially infected."

"And if whoever worked here came from Piquis, they would have taken it back with them and then infected other Krellonians who were never even close to the initial boron exposure," she said.

Eli nodded. "I think this might be exactly what happened here. And now that I know that the virus was triggered by boron-based radiation, I might be able to devise an antidote."

"The question remains why the boron was here in the first place. What were they doing with it?" said Tazla and then moved on to the next door that was still sealed in place and contained a small viewport.

"Does it matter? We may have just figured out how to beat this plague."

She raised her tricorder to scan the contents of the sealed room but froze when she noticed the readout on its small display.

"Omega? What does that mean?" Eli asked as he noticed the blue symbol for the Greek letter appear on Star's tricorder.

Her only response was an ancient Trill curse the likes of which startled even the world-weary Elijah Katanga.

He didn't get much of a chance to inquire further on the matter since her tricorder was sounding yet another, urgent alarm.

"When it rains," she mumbled to herself and then looked up at the puzzled doctor. "I set up the shuttle's sensors to alert me of any activity before we left. Looks like we're about to have company."

"We need to get out of here. Take what we've found back to Piquis," he said.

She clipped her tricorder to the waist of her suit. "No argument here. In fact, the quicker the better. Hold on to me," she said as she reached out for him.

"Why do I have a feeling I'm not going to like this part?" he said but still grabbed hold of her outstretched arm.

"No point complaining now, you were the one who wanted to come here."

"One thing you should know about aging humans," he said, "is that complaining about things is our favorite thing to do."

"I had noticed. Turn off your boots," she said and then did the same to her own, causing her to start drifting away from the deck plates once the magnetic lock had been broken.

He did the same and in moments he was floating next to her.

"Hold on, this might be a little uncomfortable."

"I'm a Doctor, I know that means you're understating things."

With her free hand, she wrapped some of the slack tether around her gloved hand and then, once she had a firm grip, pulled on it sharply.

The tether reacted almost instantly, reeling back at high speed and jerking them both forward and toward the shuttle. The mad dash through the outpost barely afforded them a chance to dodge any debris and loose items still floating between them and their destination, and for the most part, the best they could do was try and turn their heads to protect their face plates from any impacts.

Thankfully they had already cleared most of the larger items that had been in their path earlier but Eli did have a close run-in with what looked like a heavy fuel drum tumbling right in front of them.

Tazla was certain she'd be sore in the morning, particularly since they were both unceremoniously dumped into the interior of the shuttle, landing hard on the deck once they had passed the force field and the artificial gravity took hold of them once more.

"All right, let's not do something this stupid ever again," Eli groaned as he struggled to pull himself off the floor.

Tazla was on her feet much quicker, practically ripping off her helmet and gloves and climbing behind the controls, not bothering

with removing the rest of her suit for now. She looked over the console. "We've been scanned."

"By whom?" Eli asked, still in the process of getting off the floor, having only managed one knee so far.

She shook her head. "I'm not sure but—" Glancing up at the large forward viewport, she stopped herself when she caught sight of another asteroid, this one easily as large as the one they had just come out of. She hadn't paid attention to it before since it was mostly unremarkable except that a large section of rock was now shimmering out of existence in front of her eyes to reveal yet another asteroid base, albeit this one with what appeared to be a fully operational interior.

"I suppose this answers our questions as to where those other ships leaving Piquis have been going," Elijah said as he slowly approached the forward cockpit section.

Moments after the holographic cover had dropped, a large, bulky vessel emerged from within the asteroid. The chrome-colored ship glinted noticeably in the light of the Piquis sun. To Tazla it didn't look much like a warship but like something much more utilitarian instead.

The three small and sleek, equally chrome-covered shuttles that followed the freighter, on the other hand, looked dangerous, with visible weapons ports attached to their forward hulls.

"We need to get out of here now," she said and was working feverishly on getting the shuttle to move.

"I think it may be too late for that."

Tazla allowed herself only the briefest glance back toward the asteroid but it was all she needed to realize that Elijah was absolutely correct. Those combat shuttles were opening fire.

## Part Five: Lazarus

### 1

He watched her materialize on the transporter pad until her body had fully formed. For the briefest of moments, she glanced at him with something akin to relief in her eyes. It quickly vanished, to be replaced by a stern, professional visage, befitting a person of her stature and position.

Amaya Donners bounded down the couple of steps leading from the platform to the deck of the transporter room. "Report."

He caught himself snapping at her for her tone that would have been more appropriate for addressing a subordinate than a fellow starship commander. "The subspace fissure disappeared shortly after we made it back. There has been no further sign of it or any incursion attempts by the subspace aliens."

"That was a few hours ago. It should've stayed stable for longer."

He scowled at her. "Getting out of there wasn't exactly a walk in the park. The aliens didn't take kindly to our visit and we very nearly didn't make it back in one piece at all. In fact, I lost a crew member to those creatures."

She offered a brief nod to acknowledge the casualty. "Your civilian. Mister Bensus, was it? I'm sorry for your loss but I'm still not sure why he was part of that mission in the first place."

"He possessed knowledge about the subspace fissure and those aliens none of us had. You've seen what he was able to do before we even left. If not for Bensus, we would not have been able to open the fissure at all."

She considered that for a brief moment. "And how exactly did he come to this knowledge?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. And now it appears we might never find out."

"Damn it, Michael, you shouldn't have gone through that thing by yourself. I had a team ready and fully trained for this mission."

He was glad that he had excused the transporter chief before Amaya had even beamed on board, having already expected some sort of confrontation, he had not wanted any of his crew members to be a witness to this conversation and their growing conflict. "I did what made the most sense at the time. You were obviously out of position and would not have been able to get here in time before we lost the fissure again. There is no point in bemoaning what went wrong. Let's focus on where we are now."

His sharp tone startled her for just a moment but she quickly recovered. "All right, let's do that. What did you find out?"

Michael didn't respond straight away since, in truth, the intelligence they had obtained by visiting the subspace realm was admittedly very thin. All they had really accomplished was to secure a prisoner who may or may not offer valuable information. He prayed that the creature would cooperate since otherwise their mission would have been a complete failure and Bensusan would have lost his life in vain. "I made contact with ... something over there. I'm still not entirely sure what it was. My science officer believes that it may have been a telepathic connection. It only lasted a moment in real-time, but during that period I saw things that I'm still trying to sort out in my own head."

She didn't look encouraged by this. "It could be nothing at all. Random mental imagery brought on by the obvious differences in brain chemistry between carbon and silicogen-based life."

"Yes, it could. But I saw something else. It looked like a portal of sorts. Not like the subspace fissure but something much more stable and tangible. Artificially constructed."

That did pique her interest. "A portal into subspace? It could be what we've been looking for. The means by which they plan to carry out their invasion."

He nodded. "That's what I thought."

"Did you see anything else? Anything at all that could give us an indication of where to find it?"

He shook his head. "No, nothing like that. And the images I saw were not clear. It was all very nebulous. Literally, like hidden by a thick fog."

She uttered a sigh. "Then it's a dead end."

"Not if our prisoner can fill in the blanks for us."

"What's its status?"

"We managed to stabilize it by flooding one of our cargo bays with solanogen gas and changing the composition and consistency of the atmosphere and gravity in that section. We don't know enough about its race to hold it indefinitely, I don't think, but for now, it remains conscious. We've tried to communicate with it without any success."

"Very well, let's go see our guest then," she said and headed for the doors.

"Maya," he said, stopping her short and forcing her back around.

"I can't believe I even need to say this but I think it's time we established some ground rules," he said.

She almost smirked but it never quite reached her eyes.

"Ground rules?"

"I'm willing to put up with quite a bit for the good of this mission. Whatever that turns out to be. I always thought – no, strike that – I know that we have had a good relationship in the past. Professionally and otherwise," he said, letting that last sentiment hang in the air for a moment.

She didn't rise to the bait. "Get to the point, please."

"This is my ship. When you're on-board *Eagle*, I'm in charge and regardless of our present issues, or whatever you want to call it – I expect you to follow my lead here. I won't tolerate anything less."

Her facial expressions turned into noticeable annoyance. Then she reached for her forehead, massaging it slightly. "Michael, there's no need for posturing. Your ship, your rules. It goes without saying."

He was about to respond, telling her that as of late, whenever she had been around, it hadn't quite felt that way at all. But he was interrupted by an incoming call.

*"Sickbay to Captain Owens."*

He recognized Doctor Barry Nelson's voice, and it sounded somewhat agitated. "Owens here, go ahead, Doctor."

*"Sir, we need you here right away."*

He exchanged a quick look with Amaya. "Can this wait? There is some urgent business we need to see to."

*"I'd rather you'd come to sickbay first, sir."*

Michael sighed but ultimately nodded. "On my way, Owens out," he said, closing the link and then glancing back at his guest. "Let's make a quick detour."

Less than three minutes later and with Amaya in tow, he entered sickbay and found Nelson and Xylion waiting for him. Both men had their backs turned to the two captains as they approached. "All right, Doctor, what exactly was so urgent that it couldn't wait."

Nelson and Xylion turned around and in doing so revealed a third man sitting upright on the biobed in front of them.

Michael couldn't keep his mouth from dropping open in surprise.

It was Bensu. Alive and well.

Amaya spoke first. "I thought you were supposed to be dead."

"I got better."

Michael didn't appreciate Bensu's quip, not considering that he had been led to believe that he had died, practically in his arms just a few hours earlier, had seen his broken body and soulless eyes himself. Certainly, a far cry from what he looked like now. His astonishment was quickly followed by a sense of relief, followed by a tinge of anger at having been lied to in such an unscrupulous manner. "What the hell is going on here?"

"As it turns out," Nelson said, not sounding terribly certain of himself as he spoke, "Mister Bensu may not be entirely ... biological."

"What?" Amaya said, beating Michael to it by a microsecond or so. "What does that mean?"

Xylion continued. "Bensu possesses a synthetic body that superficially appears entirely biological, even to medical scans. It is a body we constructed to house his *katra* over multiple decades."

That, to Michael, explained almost nothing. Instead, it only raised new questions. He pointed at Xylion and then Bensu. "You and you. In my ready room. Now. And you both better have a damned good story to tell," he said and then turned on his heel.

"Michael, I'm not sure we have time for this," Amaya said as he walked straight by her.

But he was done delaying this conversation which he knew had been overdue the moment Bensu had unexpectedly appeared on the bridge. "We'll make time."

Lif had thought long and hard about the things Garla had told him and he had come to the conclusion, that for now at least, he was going to help her and see where her bold designs might lead.

There was no doubt in his mind that her plan of a so-called stand-alone society was both bold and unorthodox. It also was clearly antithetical to everything he had learned and come to accept after he had left Krellon and begun to immerse himself in Federation culture and society which, first and foremost, prided itself on its tolerant and inclusive philosophy.

But there was also little doubt that the Federation and the Star Alliance had very different histories and as such its people had taken very divergent philosophical avenues. Yes, he had argued with himself, the Federation was made up of a great many worlds, most of which with dark histories of their own in which entire sections of populations had been targeted for genocide, enslaved, disenfranchised, or otherwise subjugated and discriminated against.

But most of those shameful histories lay in the distant past for those worlds and they had generally managed to overcome those internal challenges long before they had decided to join an intergalactic community where all people were guaranteed the same basic rights.

The Krellonians, as recently as two hundred years ago, had set out to conquer their neighbors, devastated their worlds, and abused their populations as slave labor. Conditions, of course, had improved since, but the rift between Krellonians and Outlanders had never even come close to healing while systematic racism throughout the Alliance was alive and well, as he had experienced first-hand.

And Lif did understand that the Star Alliance was certainly not unique in the Alpha and Beta Quadrant with this dilemma. After all the Klingons, the Romulans, and the Cardassians all shared similar histories in subjugating races of people they had deemed inferior, and yet he knew of no other people who struggled more with the question of equality or who were so close to a dangerous and ever-widening precipice that was threatening to tear its society apart.

So when all was said and done, and while he was not exactly proud of this, Garla's plan made a certain amount of sense, and it was the only solution he had ever heard from a Krellonian – or an Outlander, for that matter – to seriously address the great issue of their time.

And while she had still not shared every detail of how she intended on implementing a scheme to entirely separate multiple societies and people who had been closely linked for many decades, he remained curious to learn how she intended to accomplish this and if perhaps this solution, at long last, would mark the end of a struggle that had lasted for centuries and that had caused Lif – and likely many more like him – to become ashamed to be called Krellonian.

"I know this might sound somewhat ironic, considering what we are trying to achieve, but in order to make what I have proposed work, we'll need help," Garla told him in her office.

"The Federation?" he asked.

She quickly shook her head. "No. I don't trust the Federation and I'd rather have nothing whatsoever to do with them. I'm still convinced that Yorlo inviting them here was a grave mistake."

He shot her a glare. "I work for the Federation. Without Yorlo I wouldn't even be here."

"Yes, I know. And that might be the only good thing that came out of this. But the Federation would never sanction what I am proposing. It is entirely anathema to what they stand for and promote throughout the galaxy. What you and I know but the Federation doesn't understand, is that their ideology, as noble and progressive as it might sound, is not an automatic fit for every society in this galaxy," she said and shook her head. "It won't work for us, Lif. And once we have completed the momentous task of rebuilding the Star Alliance, you, me, and countless others, Krellonians and Outlanders alike, will be able to begin anew without the fears and anxieties that have plagued our thinking and our very lives for decades."

Lif squirmed in his chair a little. "I just want to be very clear about one thing, Garla. I will not be a party to any plan that promotes violence or suffering. There have been far too many examples in the histories of countless worlds of people who have sounded like you,

people with great and benign ambitions that all ended in widespread bloodshed and misery in the end.”

“I am not a monster, Lif. You should know me better than that. I have worked very long and hard on these plans, going to great lengths to ensure that it is the right solution for our people. For all people. I don’t want to tear down. I am planning to rebuild.”

Somewhat appeased, Lif nodded. “Good. So what exactly does this plan involve?”

She considered him for a moment with her brilliant, dark eyes, as if she could see deeper than the outer layers of his skin and get a glimpse into his mind instead. “I trust you, Lif, I always have. I think you’re one of the smartest people I’ve ever known and the perfect partner for this undertaking of ours. But trust also needs to be earned. I will share everything with you eventually but for now, let’s take it slow, shall we?”

“Fair enough. But you did mention that we’ll need help to make all this work. At least tell me whom we’re working with.”

“Let’s just say it is not anyone within the Alliance.”

“A foreign power, then?”

She nodded.

“I find it hard to believe that you would trust foreigners with reshaping the future of our people,” Lif said.

“I don’t. Not entirely. But it is a mutually beneficial agreement. They require resources I can provide and in turn, they will give us what we need to make the stand-alone society a reality. Don’t worry, I won’t keep you in the dark for long, I promise. After all, I will need your help with this. But for now —” she stopped herself when something on her desk captured her attention. She picked up a padd and scanned its content. “I need to deal with something,” she said and stood. “This won’t take long. Stay here and I’ll be right back.” Garla quickly headed toward the exit and left the office.

Lif looked after her, wondering what had been so urgent. He understood that she wouldn’t open up to him so quickly, after all, Garla had been a Sentinel of the Eye, a Krellonian spymaster, for decades, and one didn’t get that far in a security and intelligence organization without being careful whom to trust. He was fine with that, at least for now. If Garla was on the level, if what she was proposing was truly possible, he simply couldn’t afford not trying to

do whatever he could to make it a success. For his sake but more importantly, for the sake of billions of Krellonians and Outlanders.

He stood from his chair and began to look around the large office located high up in the Eye skyscraper building. He wasn't snooping, he told himself, merely trying to see if there was anything he could spot THAT would give any more indication OF what exactly Garla had planned.

He headed over to a bank of computer screens taking up almost the entire far wall of the office. Most of the screens were currently dark, while a few others were seemingly performing routine monitoring tasks. He could see nothing immediately noteworthy displayed on any of them and he was not willing to abuse Garla's trust by starting to dig deeper.

But just as he was about to turn away, one of the screens came to life with an urgent, flashing warning light. Without any prompting from him, the screen began to display multiple warnings. From what he could tell, it was some sort of proximity alert, what he couldn't determine was what proximity exactly it was monitoring.

He shot a quick look at the still closed doors, noticing that Garla had not yet returned from whatever she had left to do, and then turned back at the screen that seemed to demand attention and awaiting further commands.

His curiosity piqued, Lif activated a few panels on the console and the screen immediately displayed what apparently had triggered the alarm.

Lif froze.

The screen showed some sort of asteroid field and what looked like a damaged base within that field, partially exposed to the vacuum of space. However, that was not what caused the feelings of dread to rise in his stomach. There, right by that asteroid sat a Starfleet shuttlecraft, one he knew quite well since he had flown it before. It was the *Emerson*, one of the shuttles *Eagle* had left behind, and that as far as he had been concerned should have still been safely parked by the field hospital set up just outside the city. It was the *Emerson* and her clearly unauthorized presence in that asteroid field that had raised the alarm.

Looking at the screen closer, he could see a tether attached to the opened interior of the shuttle and leading into the damaged base,

meaning that somebody from the away team was most likely presently inside that asteroid.

Two figures emerged from the base, clad in standard-issue, Starfleet environmental suits, being pulled by the tether and quickly disappearing inside the shuttle. Lif went back to the console and rewound the visual feed, then paused it and zoomed in closer onto the two figures only to recognize their faces illuminated by their suit helmet lights as belonging to Tazla Star and Elijah Katanga.

He heard footsteps outside the office.

Concerned what it would mean if Garla found out that members of his team had apparently, not only violated the mandated Piquis quarantine but also, seemingly, trespassed on an Eye facility, he quickly deleted the entire feed and the corresponding alert and then whipped around just in time to hear the doors to the office opening.

It wasn't Garla entering the room, it was her assistant, the Kridrip Tenn who strode inside. He stopped sharply when he spotted him. "Where is the Sentinel?"

"She had some business to attend to. She should be back any minute."

Tenn considered Lif suspiciously and then walked over toward him and the computer console. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Just waiting for Garla to return."

It was clear that he wasn't entirely satisfied with that response and as he walked by him and stepped up to the computer, he began to activate the console and study the various screens. Lif wasn't entirely sure if he had deleted the feed correctly since he had not had much time to do it and it had been a while since he had worked with Krellonian technology. He looked on with dread as Tenn seemed to be checking every single screen in great detail.

"You shouldn't be here unsupervised. You are not authorized," he said, continuing to scan the screen.

"Obviously Garla trusts me enough to be here by myself. The very fact that she left me here, means that I am authorized," he said, using indignation to try and distract from what he had done. "Maybe start to get used to that."

To Lif's relief, Tenn stopped looking at the screens and turned to face him instead. The scowl on his face, however, seemed to attest that he would not ever be comfortable with him around.

Garla came rushing into the room then, clearly in a hurry and judging by her voice and demeanor, greatly concerned. "We have a developing situation at the facility," she said.

Lif felt a cold shudder shoot up his spine.

"What kind of situation?" Tenn asked, briefly giving Lif a look that seemed to confirm his suspicions about him.

"It's one of the freighters. It's been hijacked."

He felt a weight lift off his chest. "A freighter?"

"I'll explain on the way," she said. "But we need to leave right now and resolve this situation no matter what. It is essential for our plans that we take care of this now."

Lif took a few steps toward her. "Leave where? There's a planet-wide quarantine in effect."

"I'm a Sentinel, Lif, there are very few things that I cannot get around if I have to. Now, let's go, we don't have much time. Tenn, I need you to stay here and coordinate our efforts," she said and then turned on her heels and headed back out.

Lif followed her closely, no longer concerned with the Kridrip but now wondering how this apparently hijacked freighter factored into the picture, and perhaps more importantly, how Star and Katanga were involved. He also quickly understood something else. After what he had just seen, and after what he had done, he was now balancing on a razor's edge and one wrong move could have disastrous consequences, not just for him but potentially for the away team as well and on a much grander scale, possibly even for the entire Star Alliance.

### 3

She had known immediately that there was not going to be any chance of outrunning those small and nimble-looking combat shuttles that had emerged out of the second asteroid base, certainly not in the *Emerson*, so instead of trying to make a likely fool-hardy run for it, Tazla had hit the forward thrusters and unceremoniously backed up the shuttle into the hollow asteroid directly astern with no

consideration for the debris and flotsam in their path. She had powered down all non-essential systems and for all intents and purposes played possum.

The presumably Krellonian shuttles raced right past them without even slowing down, chasing after the freighter that had departed the hidden base mere moments before.

“Why are they shooting at one of their own?” Elijah asked as he followed the bizarre scene playing out in front of them as long as he could and until all ships had moved out of visual range.

“To be honest, as long as they’re not shooting at us, I don’t really care all that much.”

“So they didn’t see us?”

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. We were definitely scanned, that much seems clear. I don’t think we’re totally out of the woods yet.”

“Well, we can’t stay here. We have a potential cure for this pandemic and we can’t afford to sit on it now.”

She considered her options for a moment. Then, after making sure the freighter, as well as the shuttles chasing it had moved on, she reactivated the thrusters to nudge *Emerson* forward again. “I’ll plot us a course back the way we came, but we’ll need to stick to thrusters until we’re out of the asteroid field.”

Leaving the belt without the use of the impulse engine took some time during which Taz and Katanga sat mostly in silence, the latter more than likely considering everything he had learned on the asteroid and how he could use this knowledge to quickly and efficiently synthesize a cure.

It wasn’t until they had finally cleared the asteroids and Piquis came back into view that Eli asked the question Star had been dreading ever since they had left the destroyed base behind. “What was it you picked up in that base that had you so spooked?”

She kept her eyes glued to the viewport for the moment, avoiding eye contact with him.

Of course, ignoring Elijah Katanga had never been a strategy proven to be successful. “Taz?”

“I can’t talk about it,” she said without moving her head.

“Not this again. I thought we had been through all this mystery bull already. I thought we had come to an agreement that—”

She turned to look at him. "Eli, I love you. I really do. And trust me if I could I would share with you whatever it is I know. But you have to accept that there are things that – because of my position – I am not at liberty to discuss with you. I'm sorry if that puts a strain on our friendship. I wish it wouldn't. But sometimes it isn't up to me. We're both small parts of something far bigger than either one of us and in times like these we just have to accept that and move forward."

He glared back at her with an intense stare that to Taz felt as if he was attempting to pierce her skull. Thankfully she was fairly confident that Elijah, for all his skills, was not a telepath. "This thing you've found," he said. "Do you think it is related to the disease on Piquis?"

"The boronite clearly does," she said without hesitation. "But I don't see how anything else we found on the asteroid is related."

This seemed to appease him slightly. "Could what you found pose a danger to us and the planet?"

She faced away again. "Yes."

"Then what do you plan to do about it?"

She had no immediate answer to that question.

## 4

It wasn't often that Michael Owens was conflicted about how he should feel about an issue. Even though, of course, he hadn't truly known Bensusan that well. Up until recently, he had considered the enigmatic man as not much more than a civilian member of his crew. He had joined the ship on the recommendations of his close personal friend Xylion and had been allowed to stay on *Eagle* even when most other civilians had left when the Dominion War had broken out.

Michael was undeniably pleased to realize that the news of his demise had been wildly exaggerated when he had found him alive and well in sickbay.

Bensusan's surprising knowledge of the subspace aliens and their domain, making it possible for *Eagle's* away team to reach it in the

first place, had raised several questions. The revelation that Bensus was, in fact, a synthetic lifeform, something that appeared to have been well-known to his own science officer and that had never been shared with Starfleet or with him, felt at best like an unacceptable omission and at worst like a betrayal by one of his senior officers.

The very same he was now staring daggers at as he stood in front of him in his ready room, posture perfectly erect, eyes pointed straight at the bulkhead behind where Michael was sitting at his desk.

The subject of this entire mystery stood in one corner of the room, making eye contact with nobody.

Amaya Donners who had also shown some confusion at this latest revelation, even if it didn't seem to rival Michael's own feelings on the matter, sat on the couch on the other side of the room, her attention split between the Vulcan and the civilian.

Xylion had just finished explaining the origins of Bensus, dropping one twist after the next, which had left Michael pretty much speechless for most of it. Bad enough that apparently Bensus's spirit – his *katra*, Xylion had called it – had apparently resided within Xylion's mind ever since he had come across his incorporeal form while he had crossed the unforgiving desert of the Vulcan's Forge while he had been a child, Xylion had further admitted that the two individuals, sharing one body, had worked together over decades to create, what had turned out to be a nearly perfect synthetic body, to house Bensus's mind, which had stood up under rudimentary medical scrutiny as being entirely biological.

"Let's make one thing perfectly clear, Commander," Michael said once Xylion had seemingly reached the end of his amazing tale. "I am not upset to learn that Mister Bensus is much more than meets the eye." He shot a brief look at the alien in his now, once again, fully restored synthetic body. "After all, Starfleet's main mission remains to make contact with new life in all of its forms. And Mister Bensus certainly qualifies as one of the more unique lifeforms we have come across. What I have a difficult time wrapping my mind around is that you felt it necessary to hide this matter from your commanding officer all this time."

"Sir, I propose to you that if Lieutenant Commander Leva or Lieutenant Deen had asked permission for a civilian associate of

theirs to join *Eagle's* crew, and that if this associate had certain physical properties outside what is considered the norm, for example, a synthetic limb, you would not have felt it a requirement for this information to be shared with you."

"Mister Bensus doesn't have a synthetic arm or leg," Amaya said, leaning forward from where she was sitting on the sofa. "He's an entirely synthetic lifeform."

Xylion considered the other captain. "That is not entirely correct, sir. Bensus's body is synthetic. His mind, however, is not."

Michael shook his head. "There is a big difference between somebody having an artificial limb and having an entirely artificial body, especially since there is practically no precedent for it within Starfleet."

"There is an artificial lifeform that serves on the U.S.S. *Enterprise* –"

Michael waved him off. "I am well aware of Commander Data, Mister Xylion. But the key difference here is that his crew, as well as Starfleet, were well aware of his nature as an android long before he became an officer."

"Mister Bensus does not serve in Starfleet."

"You are missing the point, Commander."

Xylion raised an eyebrow in response.

Michael uttered a frustrated sigh and once again glanced toward the subject of their discussion who was still perfectly content to avoid taking part in it. He turned back to regard his science officer. "Are you seriously telling me that you believe that hiding Mister Bensus's true nature from us – from me – while he was part of this crew, was appropriate? That it was logical?"

That seemed to bring him up short. "No, I cannot in good conscience state that it was a logical decision."

"You shared a mind with Mister Bensus for what, seventy years?" Amaya said. "Is it possible that this may have clouded your judgment somewhat? Hell, if I had to share my mind with another person for that long, I'm pretty sure I'd go nuts."

Xylion turned to look at Donners. "If you are asking me if I believe that my experiences with Bensus have made me unable to function logically, I would point to my exemplary service record on this vessel as evidence to the contrary."

“Alright, nobody is saying that you’re not an impeccable Starfleet officer, Commander, or for that matter, a lesser Vulcan. But isn’t it possible that on the matter of Mister Bensus you may possess a somewhat subjective viewpoint?” Michael said. “You admitted yourself that the decision of hiding the truth about him was not logical.”

“Considering the evidence, I concede that there might be merit to your theory, sir. I will need to consider the matter more thoroughly.”

Maya stood from the couch. “Well, we don’t exactly have time for you to do that just now,” she said and then took a couple of steps toward Bensus. “What I want to know is how you were able to create a subspace rift and why you know about the subspace aliens.”

Bensus looked up for the first time. “I wish I could tell you. The truth remains that I just don’t fully understand how I’ve come in possession of this knowledge.”

Amaya didn’t seem satisfied with that response judging by the frown on her face. “I’m not buying that. We’re facing a possible invasion attempt by a hostile and mostly unknown, extra-dimensional threat, and here you are, another mostly unknown element. I can’t help wonder if you may not also be a threat to us.”

“I can attest that Mister Bensus does not pose us or the Federation any harm,” said Xylion.

She pinned the Vulcan with a skeptical glare. “And I’m not clear how you could possibly do that since you seem to know just as little about him as he claims he does.”

“They have shared minds for decades,” Michael said. “I would think that if Mister Bensus truly were a threat, he would not have been able to hide it.”

“Or perhaps this mind-sharing had a more profound effect on Mister Xylion than even he realizes. We’ve already established that his logic has been flawed as it pertains to Mister Bensus.”

But Michael was not yet willing to go down that route. He had to believe – and nothing in his five-year experience with the Vulcan told him otherwise – that Xylion was still as reliable an officer and a man as he had ever been. “I’m willing to give him the benefit of the doubt here. For now.”

Amaya Donners was clearly not as convinced, but apparently remembering his earlier warning when she had first beamed onboard, she backed off, satisfied, at least for the time being, to let him handle this matter how he saw fit.

"We've been focusing a lot on what we don't know," Michael said and considered the two men again. "Why don't you start telling me what we do know about Bensus's background?"

With Bensus still reluctant to speak for himself, Xylion picked up the question instead. "We have only very recently learned that Bensus appears to belong to a race of people not native to this galaxy. This race developed technology that made it possible for their minds to be transplanted into fully synthetic bodies."

"How did he end up on Vulcan?" Michael asked.

"It appears that he survived the destruction of his homeworld. The manner in which his mind was able to span the distance between his galaxy and ours is still not clear."

*Agamemnon's* captain shot Michael an insistent and clearly skeptical look but Michael decided to ignore it for now. "And you learned all this how?"

"By retracing our steps in the Vulcan's Forge and using residual energies that were still present at the location of our first joining, we were able to initiate a mind meld that unlocked some of Bensus's memories."

Michael nodded, recalling that Xylion and Bensus had only recently been on shore leave together on Vulcan, ostensibly to honor a tradition of revisiting Xylion's maturity ritual decades after he had first undertaken it. It was clear now that there had been much more to that trip. "I'll need some time to consider the full implications of this bombshell you two have dropped on me. For now, you're both dismissed."

Xylion turned and left the ready room without delay. Bensus hung back just a moment longer, making fleeting eye contact with the captain before he too followed the Vulcan.

Amaya turned to Michael as soon as the doors had closed behind them. "You've got to be kidding me with this."

Michael massaged his temples to try and stave off a headache he felt coming on. Considering what he had just learned, he thought it to be a futile effort.

"I don't believe half the stuff I just heard."

He glanced up at her. "You've been in Starfleet long enough to have seen some strange things, I'm sure."

"There's strange, and then there's strange, and then there's this."

The intercom signal interrupted their deliberations. "*Leva to Captain Owens.*"

Michael was almost grateful for the intrusion. "Go ahead, Commander."

"*Sir, we've just received a priority signal from Arkaria XI. We've been instructed to return there at once.*"

Michael looked at Amaya. "Understood, Commander. Owens out," he said, closing the channel. "Jarik."

She nodded.

"I take it you told him about our guest."

"He needed to know that we've taken one of the aliens prisoner. And I suggest we make our way back there as quickly as possible. We've lost enough time already."

But Michael was torn on that subject. Part of him just wanted to hand over their prisoner to Amaya so that he could return to Piquis as soon as possible where he had left Star and a good quarter of his crew. Her last update had indicated that she had decided to investigate anomalous readings that might force her to ignore the planetary quarantine. He had somewhat questioned the wisdom of trying to antagonize the Krellonians but he trusted Star to know what she was doing. But he also knew that without *Eagle* providing backup, Star and her team were exposed and vulnerable.

At the same time, he couldn't ignore the developments all around him. The things he had seen in the subspace domain, the increasing evidence of an impending invasion, and, of course, the latest revelation of Bensusan returning from the dead, and his mystifying origins and unexplained awareness that seemed far too specific to be a mere coincidence.

Amaya seemed to know what he was thinking. "Transfer the prisoner to my ship and I take it back to Arkaria, leaving you free to get back to your people."

It was a good offer and one that made perfect sense.

In the end, it was his late father's cryptic and ominous words that made him hesitate to take her up on it.

He stood, tugging down on his uniform jacket as if it would cement his resolve. "I want to have a talk with that prisoner first. And something tells me we'll want to have Mister Bensu around when we do."

## 5

Garla had taken Lif to the top of the Eye building, which functioned as a landing bay below an angled and semi-transparent roof. The sentinel walked Lif past a larger ship parked on the deck and instead boarded one of the sleek-looking shuttles, joining an already assembled team waiting inside.

Lif watched as the tinted roof above them slid open to reveal the dark and cloudy night sky before Garla jumped behind the piloting controls herself and took the shuttle out.

True to her claim, she followed a course that seemed to circumvent any sensor facilities tasked with enforcing the planetwide quarantine, keeping the shuttle close to the ground, and making use of Piquis's magnetic poles to hide their orbital ascent.

While Garla was busy navigating the ship, Lif checked the back to consider the team of twelve operatives, all armed with high-powered phaser rifles and wearing body armor, a strike force, Lif thought, outfitted for a major military engagement.

Once they had reached orbit it didn't take long at all to catch up with the bulky and much slower freighter being chased by three combat shuttles not at all dissimilar to their own.

Lif watched through the viewport as the three shuttles kept firing potshots at the larger ship, infuriating Garla. "Lif, toggle the comms."

He found the right panels promptly. It had been some time since he had been in a Krellonian shuttle, but he had grown up with vessels like these, had learned to fly in them, so it all came back to him quickly.

“The next person who takes a shot at that freighter will be assigned to scrubbing clean the inside of sanitary tanks for the next month,” she said angrily. “Keep your distance and hold your fire.”

Lif confirmed that all three ships had acknowledged the order.

Garla nodded and brought their shuttle closer until they were practically surfing in the freighter’s engine wake.

Once satisfied that the other ship was squarely within their grasp, Garla activated the autopilot and then swiveled around in her chair to face the strike team in the back. Lif followed suit.

“All right, here’s the situation. Several armed Outlanders have taken over that freighter and are holding the crew hostage. The freighter’s shields are up but, what they don’t know is that these ships have a weakness in their aft shield rotation, a tiny window that we can exploit to beam onboard,” she said.

“What do the hijackers want?” Lif asked.

“It’s always the same. Freeing prisoners, better living conditions, total autonomy, take your pick. It doesn’t matter.”

“Some of those are valid demands.”

She shot him a scowl. “You think I don’t know that? But this is hardly the way to do it. That freighter is transporting vital cargo and we cannot afford to lose it. We’ll deal with their demands once the situation has been resolved.”

Lif didn’t exactly like that approach but he understood that this was Garla’s call and there was no doubt that she had much more experience in these matters than he did.

Once it was clear that he had no further objections, she continued. “According to our remaining operatives on board, the mid-section is currently under our control. We’ll beam over and attempt to neutralize the hijackers and free the hostages. If that is not possible, we’ll attempt to take control of the flight systems,” she said and stood after she had received clear nods from her team. She walked over to an equipment locker, removed a phaser rifle, and handed it over to Lif.

He hesitated. “Maybe I should stay behind and keep an eye on the shuttle.”

But Garla shook her head. “I may need someone with real piloting skills over there in case the crew doesn’t make it,” she said, clearly not willing to take no for an answer.

Lif reluctantly took the rifle.

“Just stay close to me and keep your head down,” she said.

He looked over the phaser she had given him, making sure he knew how to operate the weapon. It was not quite as versatile as a standard-issue Starfleet rifle but it seemed easy enough and he quickly found the safety toggle, as well as the stun setting.

“Standard boarding formation,” Garla ordered and her team immediately raised their rifles, six operatives took a knee, while the remaining four assumed position around Garla and Lif. “Computer, energize transporter sequence,” she said.

The shuttle’s onboard computer executed the order at once and Lif could feel the telltale tingle of his molecules beginning to be scrambled.

Things went badly from the very start.

The shooting seemed to have started even before he had fully materialized on the deck of the freighter. The dark corridor he found himself in was alight with phaser fire blasting back and forth. He could make out flashes of figures somewhere further down, and while it was difficult to be certain, he thought they were the ones shooting at them.

He hadn’t even gathered his wits yet before he heard the screams.

“Get down!” He couldn’t clearly see her in the phaser-lit corridor but he recognized Garla’s voice.

The screams had belonged to some of her people.

At least half of them had gone down and hit the deck within moments of their beam-in.

His first conscious thought in the chaos was to find cover. Before he could even make a move, he felt the hit. A searing, burning heat, and a sting so painful, it felt what he’d imagine it would be like if a full-grown wildcat would burry its razor-sharp teeth deep into his arm.

The force of the blast forced him to spin around and lose his balance. He landed on top of another body, rolled off it, and came to rest on the hard deck.

Looking up through tear-filled eyes, he saw others go down as well in what was beginning to look more and more like a crossfire with him and Garla’s team stuck right in the kill zone.

He still couldn't see her in the confusion and the dark corridor that remained lit only by the weapons' fire flaring back and forth.

He could make out, however, a clearly lupine shape closing in on his position, blinking in and out with every phaser blast whirling around them.

Lif fumbled to find his weapon but he had lost it when he had been hit. By the time he looked back up, he could see the fur-covered Outlander hovering above him, just mere paces away now. So close, in fact, he could make out his razor-sharp teeth glinting in the ongoing exchange of fire. He could see him raising a pistol to take aim.

The Outlander hesitated once the phaser was level with Lif's head, and he wasn't entirely sure why he had decided to delay the inevitable now that he had a clear shot and all that was left to do was to pull that trigger.

It took him a moment to realize that the delay had not been one of his choosing. Dark blood erupted out the T'aq's mouth and he began to sag to the deck.

The corridor went dark momentarily, and when he could see again, he saw Garla where the Outlander had stood a heartbeat earlier, a blood-dripping knife still clutched in her hand.

Then she was gone again. But only for a moment. Faster than he had thought possible, she had moved behind him. "I've got you," she said and reached out for the neck of his tunic, pulling him toward a small alcove where she propped him up against the bulkhead. "Are you injured?"

"I think so. Left arm," he said, silently admiring the calm tone in her voice, considering the circumstances.

She quickly inspected the wound. "Grazed you good, but doesn't look deep. No damage to the bone or arteries. You'll live."

It still hurt like hell. He did his best to try and ignore it. "What happened?"

He saw her looking up but it was doubtful she was able to see much as the firefight continued. "Good question. According to what I was told, ten seconds ago, this was a safe beam-in spot."

"Well, that has changed."

Garla surveyed the corridor, even in the near darkness that was now much less regularly interrupted by sporadic flashes of phaser fire. "Three, maybe four Outlanders left down the corridor."

"How many still on our side?"

"We've lost at least five men. Not sure how many are left alive," she said.

Judging by the fact that phaser fire was still being exchanged by both sides, Lif had to believe at least some Krellonians were still in the fight.

"Can we beam back to the shuttle?"

She shook her head. "That trick of beaming through the shields only works one way. We need to make a different play here," Garla said and then thrust her phaser pistol into his hand. "Do you think you could draw them off?" She pointed toward what may have been another alcove on the other side of the corridor, in the poor light Lif wasn't entirely sure. "Take a couple of shots and then hurry over there. That should be all the distraction I need."

He looked at her as if she had just grown a third arm.

"We stay put and we may not make it out of here alive. I'm going either way, but our chances will be much better if you can create a diversion."

Lif took a deep breath, realizing that she was probably right. For just a fleeting second, he wondered how he had managed to get himself in such a desperate situation yet again, once more fighting for his life. The moment passed and he nodded, "Help me up." With her assistance, he managed to get back onto his feet.

"I just need a few seconds, don't try to do anything stupid."

"You mean besides following you onto a hijacked ship and running down a dark corridor while people are trying to shoot me?"

"Besides that."

He took one last deep breath. "Here goes nothing." He leaned forward, toward the edge of the bulkhead and fired three blasts down the length of the corridor, each shot illuminating at least three Outlanders scrambling for cover. He felt a tap on his shoulder and took that as the sign to go.

Ignoring the burning pain in his shoulder, he took off as fast as he could, crossing the corridor with only one thought in mind: Don't get shot. Again.

He saw the sprawled-out body of the Krellonian operative too late and tripped over his legs. Fully aware that if he stopped now he was likely dead, he did the only thing he could think of in that situation and jumped forward even as he fell, diving headfirst for cover.

He landed painfully on his wounded arm and managed to roll into the alcove until he hit the bulkhead, breathing hard as relentless pain shot up his arm and spread to the rest of his body.

Renewed phaser fire from the opposition once again lit up the corridor and he could see Garla smiling at him from the other alcove.

Then she was gone.

She may have been just faster than he had given her credit for, and in truth, it was difficult to focus on much of anything in their gloom-filled surroundings, but he could have sworn that she had disappeared into thin air.

He wondered if she had lied about beaming back to the ship and had instead abandoned him.

Then he heard the screams. But these didn't belong to the boarding party.

He pushed himself up, rather painfully, to the edge of the alcove to be able to spy down the length of the corridor. There he could see the frenzied phaser fire that was now no longer aimed at his direction but at a threat much nearer and more immediate.

Garla reappeared once more and smashed the head of an unprepared Kridrip into the wall of the bulkhead with such force and brutal efficiency, it left behind a large and visible blood smear.

Next, the sentinel took to the air, elevating herself by using the body of the falling Outlander and pushing herself off the bulkhead, she practically leaped across empty space with the grace of a ballet dancer half her age, and with one outstretched leg she easily felled another opponent, her boot striking him right across the face, before she brought her legs back together and slammed her knees into the chest of a reptilian Zel, knocking him onto the deck.

Driven by momentum, she executed a forward roll, wheeling over the Zel, and then came back up to deliver a perfect uppercut to the last Kridrip still standing, knocking him onto his back.

She made sure the last two men stayed down by delivering two vicious kicks against each of their heads.

Another phaser blast whizzed by Culsten from the other end of the corridor, missing Garla by a hair's width. "Cease fire, you fools," she barked.

A couple of Krellonians emerged from the other side, holding beacons to illuminate the corridor and the many dead or injured bodies littering the deck.

Garla found what looked like the highest-ranking Krellonian and addressed him first. "By the Infallible Creator, you better have a good explanation for this mess?"

The man seemed flustered and clearly exhausted. He was bleeding from a few wounds that looked mostly superficial. "Sentinel, my sincere apologies. We thought ... we thought we had the situation under control. The hijackers made an unexpected push for the bridge, just before you beamed onboard."

Garla seemed no longer interested in what had happened. "What's our status now? Have the cargo modules been compromised?"

He shook his head. "No, the cargo is secure. However, there are at least two dozen hijackers left who are holding the rest of the flight crew hostage in the aft compartments. But there is no way they'll be able to get into the cargo units."

Garla considered the man for a moment and then glanced back toward the aft part of the ship. "Given time they will."

"We can take back the ship and —"

She turned back around to face him. "Collect the wounded and the dead and abandon ship."

The officer looked back at her with a dumbstruck expression. It didn't last long, apparently it wasn't a wise career move to disregard the orders of a sentinel. He nodded quickly and then went off to follow her instructions.

Garla walked back to Lif who had witnessed the exchange from where he was leaning against the bulkhead. "Can you walk?"

He nodded. "I think so."

"Good, I need you to come with me to the bridge," she said and set out.

He followed her gingerly. He could walk all right, but it wasn't exactly smooth or painless. "I thought we were abandoning ship."

"We are. But first, we need to do something."

“What about the hostages?”

She didn't respond to that.

They reached the bridge located at the very front of the freighter after just a short walk. They found the compact command center made up of a handful of computer consoles and five chairs abandoned, the entire crew either preoccupied with holding back the hijackers or already having fallen victim to them.

“Get to the helm. I need you to get ready to engage the autopilot and activate the warp engines on a delay to give us time to clear the ship. I'll make sure that nobody will be able to interfere with the controls once we're set,” she said, even as she was headed for an auxiliary control station.

He did as he was told, lowering himself into the pilot's seat. “What course shall I set?”

She looked at him for a moment. “It should already be pre-programmed.”

He nodded when he saw the coordinates that as far as he could tell were nowhere near anything of importance at all.

The ship shuddered slightly as several escape pods shook themselves loose from the freighter.

“We don't have much time left.”

“You mean to leave the hostages?”

“The future of our people is at stake, Lif. The future of the entire Star Alliance. We cannot get derailed now by the actions of a few extremists. I hate having to make sacrifices but I've not been given another choice.”

“What happens to them when the ship gets to those coordinates?”

A loud bang against the bridge door caused them both to whip their heads around. The sound was quickly followed by more clattering and the heavy panels were beginning to budge. Someone on the other side was clearly determined to get in.

“We're out of time,” Garla said.

Lif activated the delayed warp startup sequence. “Ten seconds to warp.”

“Let's go,” she said, pointing at the bridge's only remaining escape pod.

Lif got out of the pilot's seat and made his way toward it. Garla took the phaser he still carried out of his hand and then fired it at the helm station, causing it to erupt in a shower of sparks and smoke. Then she followed him into the pod.

He could see the doors to the bridge opening to allow a gap wide enough for several Outlanders trying to get inside, just before the hatch on the escape pod slammed shut and he and Garla were catapulted away from the freighter.

Through the small viewport, he watched the ship jumping to warp, most likely dooming anyone left onboard.

No matter how thankful he felt for having escaped that ship, he wasn't able to ignore the sick feeling deep down in the pit of his stomach that something about all this was terribly wrong.

## 6

"Boronite?" DeMara Deen said, unable to mask her astonishment. "I would never have guessed. How did they even get access to it? I don't think I've ever even seen more than microscopic amounts of it myself."

After their return from the asteroid field, managing to return to Piquis just as inconspicuously as they had left it, Elijah Katanga's very first order of business had been to wake up Deen and a handful of other researchers and medical personnel and take his new-found knowledge about the cause of the disease directly to the lab.

"I've been sworn to secrecy, I'm afraid."

Deen stopped her work on the tissue sampler to pin the veteran doctor with a hard stare. "That does not sound like you at all."

He simply shrugged. "My priority has always been to find a cure to this illness, nothing more and nothing less. I am not interested in uncovering secrets or exposing conspiracies. Sometimes we just need to do our jobs and trust others to do theirs."

Her look turned into one of astonishment. "Dear Doctor, I hardly recognize you. It seems like your little trip with our first officer didn't just produce a possible cure for the Krellonian people but may also have cured you of —"

“Please, don’t say it,” Elijah warned her. “Let’s just focus on the task at hand. We have tens of thousands of patients all over the planet relying on our efforts. We’ve got at least thirty critical cases in the final stages right in this facility who might not survive the night.”

She offered him a smile instead and then nodded and went back to work. “I guess Lou was right after all.”

“Right about what?”

Deen shrugged as she activated the tissue sampler again. “Something about dogs and tricks. Human adages can get confusing.”

He frowned. “I think I’ll need to have a talk with our chief engineer at some point,” he said and then redirected his entire focus on the microscope where he observed the way the latest tissue samples were responding to his anti-boron serum he had developed.

His eyes quickly grew wide. “Sweet Baby Jesus.”

Deen abandoned her workstation to join him. “Good news?”

“I’m seeing dramatic effects on the infected samples. An eighty percent reduction in the proliferation of the virus in sample B. Almost a ninety-five percent reduction in sample C.”

Deen was speechless.

“An initial reduction of twenty-five to thirty percent is considered a clinical success,” he said.

Her beaming smile was practically radiant. “Congratulations, Doctor. I think you just found the cure.”

He nodded slowly. “We need to run a few more tests before we can think of applying it to a patient but just in case, let’s get somebody prepped to receive it.”

“I think I know just the right one.”

Elijah, Deen, and a small army of doctors, researchers, and medical technicians spent the next six hours running a barrage of tests and trials with various tissue and blood samples as well as making use of the most advanced holographic technology Starfleet Medical had access to in order to run one simulation after the next. And in every case, the diagnosis remained as positive as it had been the first time.

It was just after dawn that Elijah made the decision to administer the serum to their first patient, and one that was acutely in danger of losing her life within the next few hours.

Elijah was well aware of the risks of installing potentially false hopes in terminal patients, particularly when children were involved, and it was a well-used practice within Starfleet Medical circles to show the uttermost caution in those cases. But Chief Administrator Chella had barely moved more than five paces from her sick daughter's side since she had been brought to the Starfleet-run hospital, had practically relocated her entire office and half her staff into the facility – much to the chagrin of the medical staff who had since found itself surrounded by armed Krellonian security forces and administrators on a near constant basis while Chella was virtually running all of Piquis and its ongoing medical emergency from the hospital.

The proximity to her sick daughter had ensured that she had been immediately aware that Elijah and the rest of the staff were preparing her daughter for a new kind of treatment.

He had expected her to bombard him with questions about the treatment – questions he would have had a difficult time answering since it would reveal their clandestine circumvention of the planetary quarantine – but instead, the woman had simply stood by her daughter quietly, holding her hand whenever she could, even if she was barely still conscious, and kept her hopeful eyes on the staff busily going to and fro to prepare to administer the latest vaccine.

Elijah had played with the thought of having her removed from the treatment room more than once but hadn't been able to bring himself to do it since she did her absolute best to try and stay out of his people's way.

Chella remained by her daughter's side even after the treatment had been delivered and while most of the medical personnel had already cleared the room, she had fallen asleep in a chair by her side.

"It's been what? Two hours?" said Deen, noticeably suppressing a yawn as she watched the still unconscious patient through the room's observation window. "Shouldn't we have seen something by now?"

Elijah fought to stave off his own exhaustion, briefly glancing at another window to see the early morning light beginning to break through the cloud-covered sky. He couldn't quite remember the last time he had slept since his unsanctioned visit to the city, followed by

the rather eventful journey off-planet and then working through the night on the vaccine. Fatigue was a physician's greatest enemy, he knew, but he was sure he wouldn't be able to find any rest until he had some results, positive or negative.

"Medicine isn't as black and white as astrophysics or quantum mechanics. Just because something worked in a lab, doesn't mean it will translate to an actual patient," he said, trying not to sound as pessimistic as he was beginning to feel.

"The fact that you believe quantum mechanics to be a black and white field tells me that you don't know much about it," she said with a brief glare.

"I know that it won't help us heal that little girl. That's all that matters right now."

Deen turned back toward the observation window and nodded. "Agreed."

Tazla Star joined them both. "Any progress?"

He shook his head. "Not yet."

"You two look awful," the first officer said. "Have you gotten any sleep yet?"

"I'll sleep once I know if this works."

The Trill turned to her old friend. "You need to get some rest, Eli. Don't make me order you to your bunk."

"I'm fine," he insisted.

But Tazla shook her head. "You're about to keel over, I can see it in your eyes. And the last thing I need is for my chief medical officer to become a patient. Doctors make the worst kind and I know because I've been both."

He was about to give in to her demands when he realized that Chella, who had been slumbering until a few moments ago, was now awake. She was bent over her daughter who had opened her eyes and was now speaking to her mother.

"I'll be damned," said Taz.

Deen pointed at the nearby monitor. "Heart rate is way up, blood pressure is normalizing and her fever is down," she said with a beaming smile as she considered Elijah.

"It's working," he said. "It's really working."

Through the window, they watched as Chella hugged her daughter tightly, who had managed to sit up on her bed already.

Even while she held her, Chella was looking right at the three Starfleet officers through the window, tears streaming down her cheeks, she mouthed the word *thank you*.

"We need to get some more blood and tissue samples from the patient," said Elijah, already thinking ahead.

But Tazla shook her head. "No, you two are officially relieved of duty for the next few hours and until you've gotten some rest. I'll make sure that the samples are taken. You will both need your strength because the hard work is only just beginning. We need to start cranking out the vaccine as quickly as possible and get it to every Krellonian on this planet. I'll get the ball rolling."

Elijah hesitated for a moment. It was, after all, a moment of triumph, which as far as he was concerned, had eluded him for too long. Now that it had finally come, it wasn't easy to let go and slow down.

Tazla put an arm on his shoulder. "Get some sleep, Eli. You've done a great thing today. I'll make sure the duty shift will get to work on this straight away. And no doubt we'll all work some double shifts in the coming days. Well done. Both of you."

Overwhelmed, momentarily, by the joy he felt, Elijah hugged Tazla and then Deen as well.

"You did it, Doc," said Deen.

"We did it," he said and looked at them both. "We all did it."

## 7

The creature had been put up in the spacious cargo bay three on deck fourteen, where a circular area measuring about ten meters in diameter had been secured with floor to ceiling, level-six strength force fields to not only keep the alien contained but also to amend the environmental settings within to something more akin to the atmospheric conditions the away team had discovered in its native subspace domain.

Michael had since been advised that the creature had been close to death when it had been exposed to the relatively low-gravity and oxygen-nitrogen-rich ship atmosphere and had slowly begun to

recover after the environmental conditions had been amended within its makeshift cell.

He could tell that it was still suffering from the sudden exposure even now, as the long-robed reptilian moved much slower around the restricted area than what he had observed in subspace. It gingerly touched the force field at various points with its three-clawed hand as if to determine any weaknesses.

It seemed to pay little attention, however, to the people who had assembled in the cargo bay, including Michael, Amaya Donners, Xylion, and Bensu. Jose Carlos, who was in charge of security in Nora's absence was also present, standing nearby with a phaser strapped to his hip. Carlos was clearly not taking any chances since he had six additional armed security officers positioned throughout the bay, guarding the prisoner from almost every angle.

Xylion had presented him with a small silver device after he had entered the cargo bay. It looked like a diamond-shaped bracelet that clipped to the wrist. Its smooth surface contained no features he could determine.

"This was the only instrument on the prisoner," the Vulcan said. "Initial scans suggest it may be a communications device. The manner in which the alien was attempting to use the device, I theorize it may function as a retrieval system. Judging by the powerful energy it emits, it may be able to work across dimensional plains."

"That's a lot of power for something so small," Michael said as he studied the unassuming device closer. "Are we sure it has been disabled?"

"It appears to only function if in direct contact with the alien, however, we have taken additional precautions by activating a wide-frequency jamming field in the cargo bay."

"I wonder if we could use it to return to subspace ourselves."

Xylion offered a small nod, showing that he had considered that possibility himself. "That might be possible. I would require further analysis of the device before we can understand its full functionality."

Michael looked at the alien behind the force field. "Has it attempted to make any contact with us?" Michael asked Carlos who had kept an eye on their guest ever since they had brought him here.

He didn't like using an indeterminate pronoun to refer to the creature since he thought it was important to not lose sight of the fact that it was a sentient being, but he couldn't even guess its gender, or if its race even had any. He knew that initial medical scans performed by Doctor Nelson and his staff had been inconclusive.

Carlos shook his head slightly from where he stood; his muscular body tense and ready to strike at a moment's notice. "No, sir. Nothing that could be construed as such. Mostly it has been exploring the limits of the confined area."

"It stands to reason that the creature is highly disoriented by its new surroundings and may not be equipped to fully process them," said Xylion. "Its initial attempt to trigger the communications device may have been an instinctive reaction."

Maya Donners was not convinced of that theory. "It belongs to a race that has abducted and experimented on people from our domain. A race now planning an invasion of our space," she said and shook her head. "It knows exactly where it is and what is going on."

But Michael didn't get that impression from the captive alien, to him, it looked more confused and bewildered than anything else. Of course, he was quick to admit that it was almost impossible to judge certain species merely by their appearance or even their observed behavior.

Amaya took a step closer to the force field but the creature continued to ignore her and the rest of its visitors. "By all accounts, these creatures acted in a hostile and violent fashion when you encountered them in subspace."

"Correct," said Xylion. "However, their behavior was not an unexpected response to our intrusion into their domain and our efforts to abduct one of their kind."

"In other words," said Michael. "They may have just been trying to defend themselves. In their eyes, we might very well be the bad guys."

Amaya nodded slowly, her eyes still glued to the reptilian while rounding the edge of its energy cell. "All the more reason to attempt to make contact with it."

"The universal translator has so far been unable to identify or replicate the syntax of their language. This may be due to the limited sample size we have available," the Vulcan science officer said.

“We need to get it talking,” said Amaya and then began to round the cell from the outside to get closer to the alien. But the creature continued to ignore the starship captain, even when she began to follow as it waddled along the circumference of the force field. “I am Captain Amaya Donners of the United Federation of Planets. We seek to establish a dialogue with your people.”

Michael watched on as she was entirely ignored, much to her frustration. After half a minute or so, she stopped and looked back at him. “This is ridiculous.”

“If we cannot understand its language, it might not be able to understand ours,” he said to her as she returned to the group.

Bensu stepped forward until he stood right by the force field. He watched the alien coming slowly toward him and when he was nearly facing it, he reached out to touch the force field. The alien stopped and turned its large, dark eyes at him.

“Well, that’s a start,” said Michael.

The creature made contact with the force field on its side so that their hands were nearly touching if not for the thin yet powerful, and now flaring energy field between them.

Then the creature began to talk.

Or at least Michael thought it was talking since it was practically impossible to tell by the fast clicking noises it was producing and it certainly was still not enough for the universal translator to make sense of it.

And Bensu was clearly listening.

Michael, Amaya, and Xylion quickly moved closer, observing what appeared to be a one-way conversation.

After a few moments, the creature pulled back again and stepped away from the force field, in fact, it was retreating as far from Bensu as the cell allowed.

“Were you able to understand it?” Michael said.

“Some of it. But it’s difficult to make sense of it all.”

“How about a name?” asked Maya.

“Beholder.”

“Beholder?” Michael looked at Bensu and then back at the creature in the cell. “Is that its name or what they call their people?”

Bensu shook his head. "I cannot be sure. It could be either, or it could be something else entirely."

"What else did it say?" Amaya said.

"I think it is scared. It doesn't seem to fully comprehend what has happened to it. It's hard to tell. It could be angry at having been taken against its will," he said and then looked at Xylion and the wrist device he was still holding. "I believe it wants that back."

Amaya shook her head. "Well, that's not happening. But we will need to find a way to communicate with this creature more reliably," she said, considering both Michael and Bensu. "I suggest you keep working on it, even if you just get it talking. With any luck, the UT will eventually catch on."

Xylion reviewed a padd he had brought. "I can confirm that the universal translator has made minor progress in deciphering the language based on the small sample it has received. It is not yet sufficient to attempt translating its language or allowing us to communicate with it directly."

She turned to *Eagle's* captain next. "We need to get this alien back to Arkaria IX. Hopefully, we'll be able to communicate with it by then. But we are wasting time if we're just sitting here. I suggest you let me transport the creature along with Mister Bensu to *Agamemnon* and we part ways."

Michael considered that for a moment. He wasn't comfortable with the idea of handing over the creature and his enigmatic bartender to Amaya. Perhaps a few weeks ago he wouldn't have hesitated, but things had changed. Of course, he disliked the idea of leaving Star without support on Piquis just as much.

"No offense," said Bensu. "But I'd rather stay right here on *Eagle*."

"You don't have a choice in the matter, Mister," said Amaya sharply. "Your knowledge and skills – regardless of how you've managed to obtain them – are mission critical. We'll need you along with the creature."

Michael shook his head. "Bensu is a civilian. If he doesn't wish to join you on *Agamemnon*, he can't be made to go."

The glare in her eyes seemed to say otherwise. "Civilian or not, he is attached to your ship which means he is your responsibility and answers to your authority."

Michael didn't care for the lecturing tone in her voice nor was he so certain about the legality of what she was alluding to. He understood that any civilian serving on his ship still had to follow his orders, just like any other crewmember but he also understood that there were limits to this. Such as ordering Bensusan to join another crew to carry out what was essentially a Starfleet mission.

He knew he had to decide since she was absolutely correct about at least one point she had made. Staying put was probably the worst course of action he could take. "Return to *Agamemnon*," he said. "We'll follow you to Arkaria."

She hesitated for a moment as if she was considering trying to argue her case, clearly more comfortable with her suggestion, perhaps because she saw him and *Eagle* as an unnecessary complication. She eventually thought better of it, offered him a sharp nod, and then headed for the transporter room.

## 8

Louise Hopkins couldn't remember ever having been more tired in her life.

It had been a long day. After Doctor Katanga and his medical team had managed to synthesize a viable cure for the Piquis Plague, Star had drafted every available member of the away team to work double shifts to make sure it could be produced in the quantities required. It would have been a difficult task even with *Eagle* providing support, but on their own, it had been a real undertaking that remained in progress, even a full day after the initial discovery.

Louise wasn't a stranger to hard work, but since she wasn't used to working off-board, usually preferring the familiar surroundings of her engine room, she had not coped well with adapting to the twenty-eight-hour day on Piquis.

She had looked forward to getting at least a decent six-hour's rest in her bunk before being called back to continue to work on the vaccine when Lif had urgently called her to his cabin on the *Nebuchadnezzar*.

He bid her inside the moment she had activated the annunciator.

"There you are," he said as soon as the door had slid open. "I called you ten minutes ago."

"It's been one of those days."

"Let's not compare notes," he said.

She shot him a glare. It wasn't that she thought that her day had been worse, she already knew he was having a difficult time working with his intelligence officer aunt, having come in serious danger at least once already, but it was how he had said it. He had been downright patronizing and sounding not at all like his usual self. "Okay, so we both had bad days. Why don't you tell me about yours?"

He shook his head. "To be honest, Lou, I don't have time to get into details with you. I need to get back to the city. All I want is a shower and a quick change."

She considered him askance. "Then why did you call me at oh-dark-thirty?"

"Because that Creator-damned sonic shower unit conked out again."

Her eyes went wide. "You're kidding me?"

"I'm dead serious."

"You called me all the way over here, in the middle of the night, because you're having trouble with your sonic shower? I'm not a plumber, Lif, and I sure as hell don't make house calls. In case you hadn't noticed, we've all had to make sacrifices and creature comforts were at the bottom of the list of our priorities," she said, trying to keep her increasing ire about this ridiculous situation out of her voice. Not very successfully.

"You've already looked at it twice, Lou. Just help me understand how it's possible that one of Starfleet's finest engineers, who works on complex warp engines all day long, can't keep a simple sonic shower working."

"I'm just going to pretend you didn't just insult me and write this off as both of us being tired. I'm also going back to bed," she said and turned to leave.

"All I'm asking for is one, quick sonic shower. That cannot be too much to expect around here," he said, practically shouting before

he grabbed a large padd lying on his cot and slinging it so hard against the bulkhead, the display cracked before it dropped to the floor.

Louise was so taken aback by the volume of his voice and the sudden violent outburst, that she noticeably flinched and jumped backward, her wide-open, and shocked eyes focusing on the broken padd on the floor.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

"That's all I ask," he said, very quietly now.

Louise was startled again when the door behind her opened up again but then quickly relaxed, feeling a tinge of relief when she spotted Nora Laas step over the threshold, a concerned expression on her face. "Everything all right in here?" she said, looking at Louise first and then at Culsten.

"We're dandy," Lif said quickly but without making eye contact with either one.

"That padd isn't," she said, pointing at the device on the deck.

"Yeah, well, it fell," he said, bending down to pick it up and tossing it carelessly back onto his bunk.

"Lou?" Nora said, considering her friend who still stood like petrified. "Are you okay?"

"We just had a small disagreement, no need for security to get —"

Nora raised a hand in his direction to cut him off. "Lif, all due respect, I'm talking to Lou. And your small disagreement was loud enough to be heard halfway around this nasty little planet," she said and then considered Louise again who only very slowly made eye contact with the Bajoran.

"He's having some issues with his sonic shower."

"So?" she said and shrugged. "Can't this wait until tomorrow? Prophets know I haven't had a proper shower in a couple of days."

"Apparently not," she said.

"Listen, I don't have time for all this, all right," Lif said, cutting into their conversation. "Can you fix it or not?"

Nora pierced Lif with a look sharp enough to cut through diamond. "I think you need to cool down, Mister," she said. "I suggest maybe you take a little walk outside, that ought to do it. I

have no compunctions about throwing you in a cell for a few hours if you prefer to calm down that way."

He raised his hands defensively. "You know what? Forget it, both of you. I've got to go anyway," he said and then pushed himself past the two women, Nora not giving him an inch while she kept her dagger-like eyes on him until he had left the small compartment.

Once he was gone, she considered the engineer again. "Want to tell me what is going on with him?"

She just shrugged. "Beats me. But whatever it is, it's really getting to him. I've never seen him like this before."

"It's no excuse. I think we better loop Star in on this."

## 9

As to Amaya's recommendation, both *Eagle* and *Agamemnon* had traveled at maximum warp to return to the Arkaria system as quickly as possible and Michael had offered no objections since modern starship engines had long since been upgraded to prevent the dangerous emissions that had been found to be so destructive to the fabric of subspace.

And the sooner he could get the situation with their alien prisoner resolved, the quicker he could return *Eagle* to Piquis to support his away team.

Star's latest update had been mostly positive, indicating that they were close to administering a planet-wide cure and vaccine. It was what she hadn't said that had him worried. She hadn't been able to speak openly on the subspace channel, even an encrypted one, but it had been obvious from her word choice and phraseology that something else was amiss. Something significant. It wasn't an immediate threat to the away team—he had no doubt she would have found a way to communicate to him if it were—but that didn't mean that it couldn't become one.

For now, Michael tried not to focus on the away team and instead watched as his old Academy friend and roommate materialized on the transporter pad, shortly after *Eagle* and *Agamemnon* had entered standard orbit around Arkaria IX.

“Permission to come aboard.”

Michael nodded with a smile. “Granted.”

He walked down the steps, taking in the transporter room even as he did so. “It’s been a while since I set foot on a ship-of-the-line,” he said. “Never fails to impress.”

Michael didn't think the transporter room was particularly interesting or distinct from other such facilities but he couldn't help feeling a certain sense of pride nevertheless. “Nothing quite like it,” he said and pointed at the doors.

Jarik headed straight for them and both men stepped onto the corridor outside.

“Don’t tell Maya I said this, but I was always fond of the *Nebula*-class design. Such a great fusion of function and design. These newer ships all look far too aggressive to me as if we're building ships to try and intimidate whomever we may meet in the depth of space.”

Michael smiled as he escorted him to the nearest turbolift. “Your secret is quite safe with me. And I happen to agree fully.”

They walked into the lift and Michael ordered it to take them to deck fourteen.

“What’s the latest on the prisoner?” Jarik asked.

“Mister Bensu has made some progress in engaging the alien. I wouldn’t exactly say that we’ve started a dialogue but at least the universal translator has picked up enough to attempt one.”

“Bensu. That’s your mysterious bartender?” he said, giving Michael a skeptical look.

“Trust me, I’m as surprised by this development as you are. But there is nothing more I can tell you about him other than what I’ve put in my report already. He appears to be a mystery even to himself.”

“It certainly sounds pretty fantastical.”

“Yes, but that is the business we are in, is it not?”

“You may be,” he said just before the lift doors slid open, depositing them on deck fourteen. “As a starship captain, this kind of thing is probably just another day at the office for you. I prefer more tangible answers to my questions.”

He followed him out of the turbolift. “Not sure you’re going to get them out of Bensu.”

"I can live with that for now. As long as I get answers from our prisoner."

They stopped in front of the doors leading to the cargo bay and Jarik turned to Michael again before they crossed the threshold. "Listen, don't think I am not thankful to both you and Mister Bensus for what you did to salvage this mission and to get us a prisoner who should give us the answers we are looking for but I don't think we'll need you or *Eagle* for our next steps. At least not now. I know you still have a team in Krellonian space, not to mention your own mission that may still play a role in all this. I'm happy to take the prisoner off your hands to let you focus on that."

Michael considered the half-Vulcan for a moment, not missing the fact that Amaya had made him practically the exact same offer just a few hours earlier. "I think I want to see this through. We've gotten this far already."

It wasn't hard to tell that it wasn't what he had wanted to hear. His worry lines were quickly replaced by a good-natured and very un-Vulcan smile. "Of course, I understand. And once all this is over, we really need to take some time to properly catch up. It's been too long since we've done that."

He nodded. They had met over drinks briefly a few weeks ago when they had both been on Earth, but considering they had been as close as best friends back at the Academy, that had seemed hardly enough time to reconnect. "Agreed. Shall we?"

Michael led him into the cargo bay where they found Amaya Donners already waiting for them. The captain of the *Agamemnon* had also brought her science officer Wayne Daystrom along, arguing that he had spent a significant amount of time studying everything there was to know about the subspace aliens, even if it wasn't much.

Xylion was also there, as was Bensus, Doctor Nelson, José Carlos, and his armed security team. The subspace alien stood motionless at the center of its cell.

Jarik headed directly to the edge of the force field to get a better look at the reptilian prisoner who did nothing to acknowledge its latest visitor. "Remarkable. How is it able to survive outside of its subspace realm?"

Xylion took that question. "We have been able to alter the atmospheric conditions within the force field to closely match the conditions we encountered in subspace."

"It is not a perfect recreation, however," said Daystrom. "There are certain elements we don't fully understand and cannot replicate. The creature is already showing signs of early cellular degradation. It's likely not going to be able to stay in our realm for longer than a few days."

Jarik nodded, keeping his eyes on the prisoner. "Hopefully it will have told us what we need to know long before then. Will it be able to understand me?"

Xylion glanced at his captain and Michael nodded his assent. He activated a panel on his padd. "The universal translator is now active and the audio within the cell is enabled."

"We have brought you here to provide us with information about your upcoming plans."

The alien glanced at him but said nothing.

Jarik turned to look at Michael and the others. "Have we established a name for this individual?"

Bensu answered. "The only thing I've got out of him that is even close to a name is Beholder."

"We don't know if this refers to its name or that of its race," said Amaya.

Jarik nodded and focused back on the prisoner. "Beholder. You will answer my questions. It is the only way we will consider releasing you. Do you understand?"

The creature stepped closer to the force field. "Prisoner."

Jarik offered another nod. "Yes, you are our prisoner. You will remain one until you have answered my questions."

"You have questions."

"Yes. We know about your invasion plans."

"Invasion."

"What is the location of the subspace gateway?"

"Gateway."

Despite his Vulcan appearance, it wasn't difficult to tell that Jarik was growing irritated with the alien's one-word responses. "We know about the subspace gateway. We need to know its exact location in our space."

“Location.”

“What are the coordinates?”

“Coordinates”

Clearly frustrated, Jarik turned away. “Is it just parroting whatever I’m saying?” he said and then looked at the only civilian on the team. “Bensu, was it? Have you had any more luck communicating with this creature?”

He shook his head. “Not really. I am not even convinced it has the mental capacity to understand complex questions.”

“Its people are planning an invasion and have built a subspace gateway into our realm,” said Amaya. “I find it hard to believe that they don’t possess a high level of intelligence.”

“Unless you captured the one imbecile in the bunch,” said Jarik, looking at Michael and sounding at least somewhat accusatory.

“We didn’t exactly have the time to carry out an IQ test.”

Jarik’s attention returned to the prisoner, studying its blank, reptilian face in detail. “I’m not buying it. It knows more than it is willing to let on. You said it cannot survive in our atmosphere?”

“That is correct,” Xylion said. “It lacks the biological ability to process nitrogen.”

“I want you to increase the nitrogen concentration inside the force field to one hundred parts per million,” he said, staring down the prisoner.

Xylion once again made eye contact with Michael who once again gave his consent. He entered the required commands into his padd. “The atmosphere inside the force field now contains a nitrogen concentration of one hundred parts per million.”

It was obvious, pretty much immediately, that the prisoner could sense the change as it began to move from left to right as if to determine what was happening.

“That is a taste of what it feels like to be in our galaxy,” said Jarik. “I believe you’ve already experienced this before. This can get a whole lot worse, or I can make it go away. All you need to tell me is the location of the subspace gateway.”

But the creature was now more preoccupied with its changed surroundings than Jarik’s questions.

“Mister Xylion, increase the concentration to five hundred parts per million.”

“This is getting us dangerously close to seriously endangering the life of the alien,” said Daystrom who had stood by mostly quiet until now.

“I have to object on medical and ethical grounds,” said Doctor Nelson who was taking readings with a medical tricorder to monitor the creature’s bio-signs.

Jarik considered both men. “Duly noted. But we’re talking about a full-scale invasion that will potentially affect billions of lives. We have no choice in the matter. If any of this makes you uncomfortable, you are free to leave,” he said and then glanced back at Michael since Xylion was clearly taking his cues from his captain.

He once again nodded and Xylion followed the order. Both Daystrom and Nelson stayed put.

The creature lost its balance and dropped onto a knee, clearly unable to handle the nitrogen exposure.

“Help me stop this,” Jarik said sharply as he stepped as close to the force field as he could. “Tell me the location of the gateway.”

Nelson was consulting his medical tricorder, shaking his head. “Its life signs are beginning to deteriorate. We cannot keep this up.”

“Tell me the location,” Jarik barked.

The creature dropped onto the deck.

“Increase nitrogen content to one thousand parts.”

“Sir, with all due respect –” Daystrom started but was quickly cut off by Michael.

“Re-establish the previous atmospheric conditions and remove all nitrogen from inside the force field.”

Jarik turned on Michael with clear anger etched into his Vulcan features. “We are so close. Don’t stop this now.”

“I disagree. We’re getting nowhere.”

“You’re gambling with billions of lives. And for what? The health of a single alien that aims to destroy us?”

Michael’s glance wandered over the others in the cargo bay. “Give us the room, please.”

Xylion, after having normalized the nitrogen inside the force field, quickly left the room along with Daystrom, Nelson, Bensu, and Carlos. Amaya stayed behind, along with the six armed security officers who were guarding the alien. The prisoner, in the meantime, was slowly recovering from its ordeal.

Jarik took a step closer to Michael. "We have it right here, Michael. It knows what we need to know. We can stop this invasion now."

"So far, I've seen nothing to hint at that this alien knows what you're talking about, let alone understand the meaning of your words. Even after it has been nearly tortured to death."

"Don't be so naïve, Michael. That is the enemy set on our destruction. We don't take action now, it may be too late."

But Michael shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jarik, I'm just not convinced. And I cannot allow a prisoner in my care to be tortured based on nothing more than your conviction."

"I can make it an order."

They stared at each other for a moment before Michael spoke. "I wish you didn't. I would have to consider it illegal under Starfleet regulations and feel obligated not to follow it. We would have to refer the matter all the way up to the Judge Advocate General's Court. As far as I know, there isn't one in this sector."

"Fine," he said, sounding slightly exasperated but seemingly understanding that he wouldn't win this argument. "I respect that you're not comfortable in doing what needs to be done due to ethical objections. The solution to this doesn't have to be difficult. Just have the prisoner transferred to my facility and I'll handle matters from here on in without you ever having to get your hands dirty."

Michael shook his head, somewhat disappointed with how poorly Jarik seemed to understand his concerns. "Since I know what you're planning to do with the prisoner once it is in your care, your solution wouldn't change anything. I cannot, in good conscience, allow you to take possession of the prisoner."

"Damn your conscience," Jarik barked. "Things are much bigger than that."

Michael said nothing, unwilling to be moved from his position.

Jarik turned to Amaya to find an ally. "Do you want to weigh in on this?"

She considered both men. "For what it's worth, I agree with you," she said to Jarik. "But it's his ship and his rules," she added.

Jarik reached for his forehead in frustration, looking back at the alien who had resisted all attempts at being interrogated so far, now back on its feet and no longer paying attention to the drama

unfolding outside its cell that was ostensibly determining its fate. Then he glanced at Michael one last time. "This isn't the end of this," he said and then promptly left the cargo bay.

"Why do you insist on making this so difficult?" Amaya asked him once Jarik had left.

"I'm not the one trying to violate Starfleet regulations and Federation law. I'm the one in the right here, Maya."

She nodded. "I'm sure that will be a great comfort to you once we are neck-deep in an alien invasion, fighting for all our lives," she said and then followed Jarik.

Michael already knew it wasn't going to be a comfort at all. He desperately tried not to think about how he would be able to live with himself with something like that on the very conscience he had tried to keep so clean.

## 10

Lif was angry with Louise and Nora. How was it they couldn't understand the pressure he was under? Granted, he hadn't shared all the latest details with either since Star had asked him specifically to report only to her for the time being, apparently suspecting that Garla was up to something much more sinister than what she had claimed.

Then again, reshaping the Star Alliance from the ground up and creating her so-called stand-alone society was nothing less than a drastic move, and so far, Garla had still failed to explain to him how exactly she planned on executing her vision.

Regardless of what Star thought, however, Lif had a strong feeling that Garla's motives were well-intentioned. She truly cared for her people. And not just the Krellonians. She wanted a better galaxy for the Outlanders as well. It just so happened that she didn't believe that these two, very different people could live and work together harmoniously. And who was to say that after the terrible and atrocious history of his people that she wasn't right believing that the only way forward was to start over separately?

Since the incident on the freighter, Garla had started to put more of her trust in him and he was certain that it was only going to

be a matter of time before she'd share all the details of her ambitions with him. In that sense, it was almost a shame that Katanga had managed to find a cure for the Piquis Plague since it would also mean the end of Starfleet's mission in the Star Alliance.

He mentally caught himself before taking that macabre thought to its dark conclusion and then promptly dismissed it. Katanga's triumph was reason for celebration and nothing else. He wondered when he had started to become so cold and clinical in his thinking and then quickly resolved to keep his mind on the task ahead.

He had returned to the city after his confrontation with Louise and Nora Laas and had apparently been given enough clearance that nobody stopped him when he strode through the lobby of the Eye building and boarded the lift that would take him to Garla's office.

He found the large doors open and his aunt along with her assistant Tenn standing by the large computer console behind her desk, studying something displayed on one of its screens with great scrutiny.

Garla heard his approaching footsteps and turned. "Lif, good timing."

"What's going on?" he asked as he stepped closer.

"Tenn here found a security alert."

Lif slowed, a bad feeling beginning to spread from the pit of his stomach. "The freighter?"

Tenn shook his head, keeping his focus on the computer console. "No, this happened just before we learned about the hijacking. I'm not sure how this was overlooked."

"Is it related?"

"It doesn't appear that way," said Garla, now once more looking over her assistant's shoulder.

"It definitely originated in the same area," the Kridrip said as he worked the panel. "It's from Site-B."

Lif slowly reached under his jacket until his nervous fingers felt the outline of his Starfleet combadge hidden underneath. "What is Site-B?"

"Think of it as a research station," Garla said, offering him a brief glance. "We had an accident there a few weeks ago and had to shut it down," she said before she focused on the screens again.

"What else can you tell us about the alert?"

"It looks like sensors picked up something."

"Can you determine what it was?" Lif said, mindful now to keep his distance from the computer and the two people working on it.

Tenn shook his head. "No, and I don't understand why. It seems the files have been corrupted. Every time I try to access the log, all I get is an error message."

"We'll go and see for ourselves then. Perhaps we can find a clue to what set off the alert," Garla said.

"I don't believe that is a good idea, Sentinel," Tenn said. "Another unauthorized departure so soon after the last one increases the likelihood of you being detected by orbital control. I would humbly suggest that we focus our efforts on analyzing the data we have right here."

"But we have nothing," said Lif. "This could turn out to be a complete waste of time."

Tenn regarded him with large, skeptical eyes and Lif immediately knew that he had pushed too hard, regretting his words instantly.

"Perhaps we just need to be patient," he said, trying to deflect from the growing suspicion. "Our team has made significant progress in finding a cure to the epidemic. Within a few days, I'm sure the quarantine will be lifted and we can check out Site-B without raising any flags."

"We can't wait a few days," Tenn said sharply. "This could be a significant threat to our operation."

Garla seemed torn between the two men's arguments for a moment, considering them both carefully. Then she turned back toward Tenn. "What if anything can you learn from here?"

The assistant considered that for a moment. "I can't get to the files. They are corrupted somehow as if they were erased. But that isn't possible unless—" he stopped himself and went back to work.

"Unless, what?" Garla said.

"Unless somebody deleted them on purpose," Tenn said as he continued to work the panel. "If true, I won't be able to get the data back but I can check the access logs. If somebody did delete the files, there would be a record and a time stamp."

Lif began to back up slowly.

“Yes,” he said euphorically. “Here it is. Somebody accessed the system and deleted the files.”

“Can you tell who did it?”

Tenn shook his head. “No, but I can compare the date stamp with internal sensors. The files were definitely erased from this station but at the time of the deletion there was only one person in this room.”

Lif had backed up all the way to the door.

“Who?” Garla said.

Tenn turned around, a small smile now decorating his lips as if finally being vindicated. He pointed at Lif Culsten. “Him.”

## 11

He had fully expected Jarik to make a move after the way they had left things in the cargo bay. Jarik had made it very clear, after all, that Michael’s refusal to allow torturing the subspace alien, had not settled the matter.

Within a few hours of Jarik having returned to his base below the surface of Arkaria IX, he had sent word back to *Eagle* that he urgently wanted to meet with Michael. In-person, alone, and at his base.

This request had immediately raised suspicion. Michael wanted to believe that his old Academy friend would not stoop to any unsavory methods to try and get his way but the truth was that he hardly recognized his former Academy roommate anymore. It was hard to ignore that he had changed a great deal from their days together at the Academy.

He remembered that the half-Vulcan had once shared his youthful ideals and yet the ease with which he had ordered the alien’s torture seemed to make it obvious that his moral compass was no longer aligned with his own.

Of course, Michael could not refuse the request solely based on suspicion, since Jarik still held operational command of the mission and therefore, at least for now, acted as his superior. Starfleet regulations allowed him – in fact, demanded – that he refused an

illegal order, but he could not do the same for a simple summons, no matter what dark speculations were playing out in the back of his mind.

Amaya who in the past had always been a steadfast ally could not be relied upon this time, she had made her own thoughts clear on the matter. He was left then to hold a quick crisis meeting with his acting first officer before he ventured into the proverbial lion's den.

His orders to Xylion were clear: If anything were to happen to him, he was not to surrender the prisoner into either Jarik or Donners' care if its safety from cruel or unusual torture or punishment could not be guaranteed. Since the Vulcan science officer was, by his very nature, an unwavering supporter of the Federation Constitution, Michael knew that he could trust him to follow those orders to the letter. In the hopefully unlikely event that he was forced to take action, Xylion's instructions were to take *Eagle* to Starbase 123 in the adjacent sector, which was the nearest Starfleet installation containing a full JAG presence he hoped would be able to resolve the issue.

It was all he had been able to do before beaming onto Arkaria, alone and unarmed.

Jarik was waiting for him in the makeshift transporter room, extending him the same courtesy he had shown him when he had visited *Eagle*.

He stepped off the portable transporter platform that had been set up in the repurposed room. He could only guess what its original function had been whenever it had been designed by its now long-lost and forgotten architects.

"Jarik."

"Michael," he said. "Thank you for coming so promptly."

He nodded. "Of course. But if you're hoping that I changed my mind, I'm sorry to say that I have not."

The other man offered a small smile. "Honestly, I would be surprised if you had. You wouldn't quite be the same Michael Owens I remember. I have to admit that I have always admired that about you. The way you stand by your idealism and your principles."

"Funny, I always thought we shared those."

"We do. Except that I'm also a realist and I'm willing to make necessary compromises when the greater good is at stake."

"Is this why you asked me to come down here?" he said even as Jarik was leading him out of the room and into one of those wide and high-ceiling corridors the ancient outpost was seemingly comprised of. "To convince me that your cause is just and necessary."

"Something like that," he said, walking down the corridor at a brisk pace while Michael remained at his side.

"You know, I always thought it was a shame that we didn't stay in touch over the years."

Jarik nodded. "That's how life works sometimes. You had yours and I had mine. We were both too preoccupied with the paths we had chosen for each other."

"Maybe. But it shouldn't be that way." For a moment the thought brought back memories of the many other regrets he had accumulated over the years. One of the biggest had not necessarily been losing touch with his old Academy friend and roommate, but losing contact with somebody else he had met during his time in San Francisco. The young woman and later fellow cadet with whom he had fallen in love with and then left behind after he had graduated. They had reunited many years later on *Eagle* and only once she had gone out of his life again, this time forever, had he truly realized the terrible mistakes he had made as a young man.

Jarik came to a stop in front of a closed door. Different to the mostly smooth surfaced, flat panel doors on *Eagle* and most Starfleet installations, the doors on this base looked thick and heavy, and had an almost wooden quality with what looked like intricate designs carved into the material. He was certain that archeologists could have had a field day with this well-preserved relic of the distant past. Somehow, he doubted that Jarik had allowed any onto his secret outpost.

"There is somebody I'd like you to meet."

"Somebody you think will change my mind? I find that difficult to believe."

"Maybe it'll just give you a different perspective on things," he said and pointed at the doors.

He stepped forward and the doors parted. When he realized that Jarik wasn't following he turned back to him. "You're not coming?"

"I think you better do this on your own."

"I don't like this, Jarik."

"Indulge me."

He sighed and stepped into the room. It was dark and before he could even try to make out what awaited him inside, the doors behind him shut close, adding to the gloomy interior.

There was a faint glimmer coming from a few screens on the wall and he could see the shape of a desk at the far end.

"What is this?" he said as he took a few steps forward. "I'm in no mood for games."

"Trust me, this is very real."

He turned around at hearing a familiar voice behind him that couldn't possibly have been there.

A man was stepping out of the darkness and it took a moment for his face to be fully revealed in the weak light.

Michael froze on the spot. "This can't be."

"Hello, son."

## Part Six: Breakdown

### 1

“What have you done?”

There was no doubt in his mind that there was murder in Garla’s eyes after the realization had hit her that it had been him who had deleted the sensor data. In all the time he had known her, he didn’t think he had ever seen her more furious as she did when she glared at him from across her office.

“I warned you that he was not to be trusted,” Tenn said, fanning the flames. “He has betrayed us, Sentinel. He is working with our enemies.”

Lif quickly shook his head. “That is not true. I can explain,” he began but already knew that it was a pure desperation move. In truth, there was very little he could explain, at least to the point of dispelling the fury and sense of betrayal that had gripped Garla.

It was Tenn who had pulled a weapon first, pointing the phaser pistol right at him, but Garla did nothing to stop him, even when he pulled the trigger.

Lif’s faster-than-human reflexes saved him yet again as he jerked sideways, slipping on the floor and falling down but also avoiding the blast that had been meant for him and causing it to harmlessly strike the still open door behind him.

He couldn’t tell if it had been set to kill or stun and he had no intention of finding out. He scrambled back to his feet and raced out of the door, only to barrel right into one of Garla’s people who had been startled by the unexpected noise of weapon’s fire.

They both went down in a heap but Lif recovered quicker, driven now by adrenaline racing through his veins. Turning his head he spotted both Garla and Tenn starting after him.

He quickly slammed the office doors shut and noticing a tall, palm-like tree standing next to the entrance, he tipped it over so that it fell in front of the doors, hopefully barricading them in the process.

It would buy him a few seconds at the most, but his actions were dictated by instinct now. He didn’t stay to check if it would slow his two pursuers and instead took off, running past several startled workers.

As he ran back toward the lift he found his combadge again and quickly tapped it but the discouraging trill it was emanating made it obvious that he wouldn't be able to get help that way, unsurprisingly the local headquarters of the Star Alliance's premier intelligence service were well shielded against unauthorized communications.

He thought better of getting into the lift as he got closer and instead barreled into what he hoped to be the auxiliary staircase and when he found that his guess had remained true, he didn't hesitate to leap upward instead of trying to reach the exit on the ground floor dozens of floors below. Perhaps, he thought, if he could reach the much closer roof, he had at least a chance, minuscule as it may be, to call for help.

He only had to climb three levels to reach the uppermost part of the building that was made up of the cavernous hangar bay with its tall, dark-tinted, and semi-transparent roof that he knew could open if required to allow vessels to land and take off.

He counted a handful of ships in the hangar: Garla's mid-sized, interstellar corvette, and a few smaller shuttles, one of which looked very much like the one they had taken to intercept the freighter.

A new plan formed in his head even as he was racing toward one of the shuttles. He was familiar enough with those designs from his youth, practically having learned to fly in ships very much similar to these, and as long as he could gain access to one, he just might be able to use it as his getaway vessel. He had no clear idea what to do once he had facilitated his escape, he hadn't thought that far ahead yet.

In his haste, he hadn't spotted the armed security guards until it had been too late. The four Krellonians had apparently already been appraised of the situation of his suddenly changed status and pulled their phasers to take aim.

Lif tried to come to a screeching halt but running at full speed, he slipped on the smooth deck and once more lost his balance as he tried to change direction.

And once again it was his own clumsiness that saved him as the initial phaser blasts whirled over his head.

Running back the way he had come from, he stopped short when he saw Garla, Tenn, and four more guards coming up behind him to block the only exit, all but Garla pointing weapons at him.

Trapped, Lif did the only thing he could think of and raised his arms in surrender. "Garla, listen to me –"

"No, I'm done listening to you, Lif. I thought I could trust you. I thought you cared, if not for me, at least for the future of our people and the Star Alliance."

"I do."

"How can I believe a single word you say?" she said as she began to step closer. "I don't know what you've been up to and who you've been helping. I don't know if Yorlo put you up to this or if you're working with your friends in Starfleet, but whatever you've been doing, it's over. And you know what the worst of it is, Lif?"

He began to take a few steps back as the enraged sentinel closed in on him with slow steps but obviously menacing intent.

"You broke my heart."

He felt his combadge vibrate underneath his jacket. A distant and distorted voice seemed to be talking but he couldn't make out what it was saying through whatever jamming system Garla employed.

She stepped up to him until she was right in his face, her attention drawn to the indistinct voice as well. She pulled his jacket aside to reveal his combadge. Then she looked back up at him with a quizzical expression on her face. "What is she saying, Lif?"

He shrugged, unable to make it out either. "Sounds like ... *backhand-lover?*"

Their eyes met suddenly when they figured it out at the same time. "Duck-and-cover."

"*Do it. Do it now,*" Nora's voice pressed with obvious urgency.

Momentarily started by those words, Garla looked up while Lif decided to follow the instructions and dropped onto the floor, falling onto his knees and covering his head with his arms.

Not a second later he felt the floor underneath him tremble just as he heard a series of loud bangs and then the sound akin to glass shattering en-masse.

He peeked upward and then immediately knew better as he got a glimpse of the ceiling coming down on them. He instinctively flattened himself to the floor keeping his arms above his head.

He wasn't entirely sure what material the roof had been constructed off but it was painful as it dropped down on top of him in tiny pieces. Mercifully, it only lasted a few seconds and once it was over, he could feel the cold and blustery air rushing into the hangar.

Looking up again, he saw the sky above clearly, and in a rather uncommon occurrence on Piquis, the early-morning sun was making its presence known through gaps in the usually thick cloud cover.

It wasn't the rays of bright sunlight that captured his attention but the four figures seemingly falling from the sky and for a moment at least, with the sun right in his eyes, he was unable to make out any features but their clearly humanoid shapes.

Louise had once told him the story of mythological beings from Earth's spiritual past who had been believed to live above the clouds and who swept in on large, white, and feathery wings, dispatched by the gods in order to save mortals in peril below. He could see no wings but perhaps he could have been forgiven, at that moment, for drawing those parallels, since the four figures revealed themselves to be Nora Laas and three SMT operators, wearing anti-grav boots.

The roof had collapsed so suddenly, it had caught everyone on the landing deck by complete surprise, most of the crew and the guards had made a run for the exit to avoid debris raining down on them, the few who had stayed behind were too dazed to offer much resistance.

The SMT operators landed on the deck and needed to do little more than keep the few remaining guards at bay. Since most of them had lost their weapons when they had tried to shield themselves from the debris, none dared to make a move once faced with the heavily modified and dangerous-looking rifles the operators were yielding.

Garla, however, seemed entirely unimpressed by the intruders and Lif didn't see her approach until it was too late to do much about it. He heard the glass-like material crunch under her boots first but by the time he whipped around, she was already upon him. Bleeding from a few scratches on her face, and her suit ripped in places, she seemed otherwise unaffected by the assault.

She was also entirely uninterested for the moment in the people who had carried it out, her entire focus instead solely directed at the one person who had betrayed her.

She delivered a perfectly placed right hook that stopped Lif in his tracks from trying to get back onto his feet and instead dropped him back to the floor. "You are not getting out of here," she said, spewing fury and vitriol. "You will learn that those who abuse my trust pay dearly."

She reached down, grabbed him by his throat, and lifted him back to his feet, astonishing Lif once more with her strength, given that she was near twice his age. Her grip was like an iron vise as she lifted him just high enough that his feet hung in the air. She meant to strangle him right then and there, her eyes burning with anger as he desperately clutched at her arm with little success.

The pressure abated suddenly and she dropped like a stone, letting go of Lif who went tumbling down after her.

When he looked up again, he saw Nora standing over them both, holding her rifle with the stock turned out, apparently having used it to deliver a powerful blow to Garla from behind. "Clearly a friend of yours," she said.

Lif reached for his sore throat, still burning after her strangulation grip. "My aunt, actually."

She nodded. "Anger issues seem to run in the family," she said and then held out her arm. "Ready to get out of here."

He took it and let her pull him back up. "By all indications, I've overstayed my welcome," he said as he looked around at the chaos that, partially, he had instigated. The armed guards, including Tenn and Garla, were all down or dazed, somewhere in the corner a small deck crew comprised of Outlanders waited for things to be over, for now being kept at bay by the Tellarite sweeping his pulse rifle over them.

The bald and bearded human and SMT team leader was glancing at a display built into the arm sleeve of his combat jacket. "We've got more tangos incoming. Suggest we ex-fil two minutes ago."

"No argument here," Nora said.

"Can we beam out of here?" Lif asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing quite as conventional. Way out is the same way we came in."

Lif looked up into the sky. "You're kidding?"

"I'm not a kidder," she said and grabbed Lif, pulling him close. "I don't often say this but step on my boot and hold on really tight."

He did as she had instructed but then got a stern look from her in response. "Not quite that tight," she said. "Don't think Lou would appreciate it."

Blushing slightly, he relaxed just a bit so that he was not pressing up against her as much.

"We could use some cover here, Sensy," Nora shouted over to the SMT leader.

He didn't even have to acknowledge the order as the Boslic and the Tellarite both tossed grenades toward the exit, almost instantly releasing plumes of thick smoke that obscured everything in that direction.

Nora looked at Lif who was practically hanging at her side. A little smile on her lips. "This is where the fun starts."

"You sure this can hold –" He didn't get to finish the sentence as he was gripped by a sensation of sudden weightlessness and he watched with increasing concern as the floor underneath him began to disappear. Within seconds they had cleared the roof and were shooting higher and higher into the Piquis sky.

It was fortunate that as the ace-pilot he liked to believe he was, he was not prone to vertigo or sudden g-forces pulling at his body. And yet, normally, in his experience, these were usually mitigated by the hull of some sort of vessel between him and the elements.

The buffeting winds made the trip anything but smooth and at least twice he thought he would slip off and plummet to his untimely death. Despite Nora's earlier warning, he was clinging on to her as tightly as he possibly could and as if his life depended on it. Which he thought it very likely did.

After what felt like half an eternity in the air, the shuttle appeared above them and he could not recall a time in his life when he had ever been happier to see one. Unfortunately, the blustery conditions and the additional weight made it no easy task for Nora to stay on course and he could hear her utter a frustrated Bajoran curse

when it became clear that they were beginning to angle away from the relative safety of the shuttle's wide open rear ramp.

Just as Lif was beginning to wonder if he'd rather be strangled to death by an outraged family member than splatter all over the inner-city pavement, out of seemingly nowhere the Boslic woman appeared beside them.

"You're heading the wrong way, Lieutenant," she shouted over the bellowing winds.

"Thanks for the tip."

With a wide grin, the SMT operator nudged her enough to put them back on track, and within moments they were once again headed for the shuttle, even if perhaps a little too fast and unsteadily.

Lif saw the team leader already having landed and as soon as they were close enough, he practically grabbed Nora out of the air and with impressive strength and dexterity pulled them both into the shuttle.

Their landing was not exactly graceful as they tumbled inside and dropped onto the shuttle deck with a thud.

Lif stayed on his hands and knees for a moment, just thankful to have something solid underneath him once more.

Nora was quickly back on her feet. He watched her tap the team leader's shoulder. "Having fun yet?"

The man offered a quick nod. "Yes, ma'am," he said but couldn't quite hide a grin under his thick beard.

"Have to admit, you SMT boys and girls have all the best toys," she said as she began to remove the boots.

"Perks of the job."

Tazla Star walked up to Lif from the front of the shuttle and pulled him up from the deck. "Are you all right?"

"I'm ... I'm not going to complain. Thanks for the rescue. How did you know?"

The Trill indicated toward Nora. "After your little outburst earlier, we thought it best to keep an eye on you. We didn't have much time to act when we realized you were in trouble so we improvised."

"Hell of an improvisation," he said.

"Wasn't sure they could pull it off," said Star and shot Nora and the operators an impressed look. "Now, sit down and relax. It's

not every day you get the XO to drive around the pilot," she said and took the seat behind the controls again. "We're not totally in the clear just yet. In fact, we may have just kicked the proverbial hornet's nest, as our human friends like to say."

Lif glanced out of the back where he could still see the rapidly disappearing sight of the city's skyline, including the Eye building with its now shattered roof, and immediately understood that Star's statement was likely a terrible understatement. Garla was on the warpath now, of that there could be no doubt, not after the way she had come after him with pure and unadulterated rage.

It was bad enough to make a sentinel, with all their training and resources, an enemy within the Star Alliance. Having a sentinel with a personal grudge after them, while stuck deep within Alliance borders, was akin to a no-win scenario.

## 2

A rush of euphoria gripped Michael Owens at seeing the face of a man he had never expected to ever see again, who had died so suddenly just a few weeks earlier, and who had left such an unexpected emptiness in his very being.

Michael had never really been that close to his father, in fact, he had resented him for a long time, perhaps unfairly blaming him for his brother's death, subconsciously perhaps even for his mother's passing, even though in Matthew's case it had been the crazed scientist Westren Frobisher who had been responsible while his mother had perished in an accident while he had still been a child.

What had never been ambiguous, however, was the fact that the man who now stood in front of him and whom he had thought lost for good had never been a good father or a good husband. He had always chosen Starfleet over family, even if he had not been shy about mixing those after Michael had entered the Fleet and he had started manipulating his career. He had always resented that side of his father and it had only been recently that he had finally started to come to terms with his own conflicting feelings, ironically only after Jon Owens had passed away.

Except, of course, that all present evidence seemed to clearly indicate that he never had.

“Dad,” he said and quickly stepped up to him, grabbing his father by his shoulders as if to reassure himself that he was in fact real. “You’re alive.”

He nodded slowly, considering him with a smile. “Very much so, yes.”

“But I buried you, I saw your body.”

Jon Owens sighed and when Michael finally let him go, he walked toward the desk by the far wall, the dimmed lights coming up as he walked. “It’s complicated, son.”

Michael remained rooted to the spot, following him with his eyes only. “You faked your own death?”

He sat down behind the desk. “I had little choice after you turned down my offer.”

“You faked your death because of me?”

He seemed to consider his answer for a moment. “There were factors to consider which I cannot get into. At least not right now. Time is not on our side.”

That sensation of elation he had felt was quickly evaporating and being replaced by increasing anger and irritation. “I think you owe me an explanation. And a damned good one at that. You made me believe you were dead. Hell, half of the Federation was at your funeral.”

“So I heard. Apparently, Madame Vrettia gave a divine performance of *La mamma morta* that would’ve made Maria Callas proud. I’m sorry I missed it.”

Michael threw him a dark glower. “Really? You make me mourn you like a fool and all you have to offer in return are jokes?”

He shook his head, his expression quickly turning more serious. “I’m sorry that I had to put you through that, I really am. But believe me when I say that I wouldn’t have done it if it hadn’t been absolutely necessary.”

He took a few steps closer to his desk. “And you can’t tell me why?”

“Not yet.”

“I see. Appears death hasn’t changed you much, has it?”

“Son—”

“No, dad, I’m done with this,” he said and turned for the exit. “You’ve finally crossed a line and unlike faking your own death, you cannot come back from this one. I’m no longer playing these games with you. I was sick of it before but I’m sure as hell done with them now.”

Jon stood from his chair. “You walk out of that door now, and you consign billions of people to their death. Whatever we’ve been just through with the Dominion will seem like a barroom brawl by comparison. Don’t turn your back on the Federation, son. Not because of my mistakes.”

His better judgment told him to just keep walking. To return to his ship, drop off his prisoner at Starbase 123, tell Admiral Throl that his father was alive and well and that he was done with this mission. Pick up Star and the rest of his crew from Piquis and then set out for what they had meant to do from the beginning and head straight for the Pleiades. All that sounded mightily tempting, nothing more so than putting a few hundred light-years between him and his suddenly resurrected father and his schemes.

But his legs were not moving. Jon Owens seemed to know exactly which buttons to push. Michael turned back to face him.

“The invasion Jarik told you about; it’s coming. And sooner than we thought. But you’ve given us an edge we’ve never had before, son. You’ve brought us a prisoner who can give us the information we need to stop it all.”

“From what I’ve seen, that prisoner knows about as much about the invasion plans you speak of as I do.”

Jon walked around his desk again, shaking his head. “I’ve been studying the subspace aliens and their designs for the last few years, Michael. Jarik and I have amassed volumes of intelligence on who and what we are up against. And I tell you right now, that creature you are holding has the answers we need. It just needs to be properly motivated.”

“By which of course you mean tortured.”

“I don’t like it either, son, but sometimes we have to make the hard choices. The ones nobody else is willing to do. Sometimes we have to sacrifice our very soul for the greater good and see past the limitations of our moral principles.”

“You may not have been much of a father to me but those moral principles you want me to disregard so easily, you were the one who drilled them into me from the time I was just a child.”

Michael thought he looked almost longing at bringing up his childhood. It passed quickly. “You can appreciate then that this is not something I ask of you lightly. I understand perfectly what this means to you. What it means to me. But if we don’t act now, I simply would not be able to live with myself knowing that I could have done more to avoid the consequences that will result from our inaction. Regret, Michael, is the most devastating emotion of all. Worse than hate, envy, or even loss. I beg you not to go down a path where regret will be all that we’ve got left.”

The words hit him hard. Perhaps because he knew all too well about regret. About the things he could’ve done differently when he had been a young man when he had loved and lost the woman who had once meant more to him than life itself. When he had lost his brother, when he had lost Jana Trenn for good, when he had lost Gene Edison and, of course, when he had thought he had lost his father as well.

“You won’t kill him.”

“You have my word.”

“We’ll do it on *Eagle*. Under my supervision.”

Jon Owens nodded. “Of course. But we have to do it now. We’ve lost too much time already.”

Michael nodded and left the room to contact Xylion so he could make the preparations.

But even while doing so, it struck him that his father was absolutely right about regret. The problem with it, however, was that one could never be quite sure which actions would lead down the road his father had warned him of.

Regret could cut both ways and for all he knew, he was halfway down the wrong path already and unable to see the true implications of his decisions until it was already far too late.

Jarik had turned out to be quite the efficient torturer, and likely thanks to his Vulcan side, had begun to demonstrate an enormous amount of patience as he kept asking the prisoner the same questions over and over again, rarely with different results.

Doctor Nelson who had monitored the alien's vital signs with increasing dread had uttered numerous protests until Jon Owens had ultimately dismissed the man after which the physician had left the cargo bay but not before making sure his objections to the treatment of the prisoner had been officially logged.

Michael wasn't sure if it was fortunate or perhaps a missed opportunity to end this farce of an interrogation earlier had Elijah Katanga been present, who he was convinced would have had to be dragged out kicking and screaming instead of walking out in silent protest over the travesty being committed.

Wayne Daystrom, Amaya's towering science officer had raised similar concerns, all of which had been summarily ignored by his father, Jarik, and even his own captain.

At least Amaya had the decency of looking somewhat uncomfortable after Jarik had brought the prisoner close to unconsciousness by drowning its air with nitrogen for the fifth time in a row.

His father, on the other hand, watched the entire thing with stone-faced apathy.

It took nearly an hour of this until the prisoner surrendered anything even remotely close to actionable intelligence. The vast majority of the utterance coming from the creature, the universal translator had deemed to be gibberish, except for a set of numbers Jarik insisted were the first part of spatial coordinates. As far as Michael was concerned, it may as likely have been a serial number or the alien's birth date.

"I do not believe it will be able to survive this treatment any longer," said Xylion who had taken over monitoring the creature's vital signs along with Daystrom ever since Nelson had left.

But Jarik, who had insisted on being able to control the nitrogen content in the cell himself via a data padd he now brandished, didn't seem to pay attention.

Michael decided that it was time to put an end to things and stepped up. "We need to stop this, now."

Jarik shook his head. "We've finally made some progress, we can't stop now."

Michael glanced over at the alien still lying on the floor of its cell, barely moving at all.

"Jarik is right, Michael, we're getting closer. The creature has already surrendered part of the information we need. It's only a matter of time until we get the rest," Jon Owens said.

"We don't even know what we have," Michael said. "For all we know those digits are entirely random. Torture is an unreliable method to gather information. Which is just one of the many reasons it has been outlawed in the Federation." He had meant to make it very clear that Jarik and his father were violating not only Starfleet regulations with their actions but also breaking Federation laws. It didn't have the intended effect.

"We've talked about this, son, the stakes are simply too high. We can do this here or we can move the prisoner to the outpost."

Michael was tempted to use more drastic measures to put a stop to these proceedings but he also knew that forcing the issue could lead to a confrontation he very well might lose. It pained him to think so but he couldn't be entirely sure where his own people's loyalties would fall. If Nora Laas had been around, there would have been no doubt in his mind that she would have stood by him no matter what, but he couldn't tell if her deputy, José Carlos would be as loyal or if he would side with his admiral father if push came to shove.

Jon Owens softened his stance a little bit upon seeing Michael's growing reluctance. "I don't like this any more than you do, son, but sometimes you just have to play the cards you've been dealt."

He decided that if he wanted to end this, he needed to find a subtler way. "Let's at least give the prisoner some time to recover," he said. "We can administer a stimulant to stabilize its vital signs. If we continue like this and the creature expires, we get nothing."

It was Amaya who regarded him suspiciously but Jarik nodded. "Fine, go ahead. But let's be quick about it. We're wasting time."

Michael watched as Jarik, Maya and his father huddled together to confer without him, which suited him just fine and allowed him to seek out Xylion and Daystrom instead.

“Gentlemen, it is my opinion that this has gone on for much longer than is acceptable. I wish to put a stop to it. Permanently,” he said quietly. “If there are any objections from either of you, speak up now.”

“I have no objections,” Xylion said quietly. “I am uncomfortable with the continued torture of a sentient being and it is in direct violation of Starfleet directives. I support any move to rectify this situation.”

Michael glanced at Daystrom. He didn’t know the young scientist very well and he was obviously one of Amaya’s people but he had gotten the distinct impression that he too was disturbed by what his captain had quietly sanctioned so far.

“The recall device,” Daystrom said immediately. “We’ve been able to disable it by jamming the receiver but there is a way to reactivate it. In theory, that should allow it to re-establish a link to its home domain and with some luck, transport it back there.”

Michael looked at Daystrom with surprise. It was obvious that he had already considered this plan.

“I fully agree that what we’re doing here is wrong. We need to do something to stop it. I’m with you on this all the way,” he said quickly.

“I can shield Commander Xylion since he is under my direct command but it’s a different story for you. If Captain Donners finds out –”

He nodded before he could finish the thought. “I accept that risk, sir.”

“I appreciate your support, Lieutenant,” Michael said. “Now, how do we get this done quickly?”

Daystrom revealed a hypospray. “This one is empty. But it would give me a reason to get close to the prisoner. Once I am, I can slip the comm bracelet back onto the alien,” he said and pulled out the alien device with his other hand.

The Vulcan offered a small nod. “It will not be difficult to calibrate the force field to allow a person to approach and interact with the prisoner. Once the device has been reattached, I can disable the jamming field.”

“I like the plan, gentlemen. Except for one small adjustment.”

The two men considered him with quizzical expressions.

"I'm going to be the one doing it. Tell me how," Michael said and took both the device and the empty hypo out of Daystrom's hands.

Daystrom protested for only a moment and once it was clear he was unable to change his mind, he talked Michael through exactly how to reinitiate the wrist device.

Michael didn't miss that Jarik was getting restless and wanted to continue his interrogation as soon as possible, so without any further delay, he headed for the creature.

True to his word, Xylion configured the force field so that it allowed Michael to close in on the prisoner, the energy field parting in front of him like a veil of cloth. He knelt next to the mostly motionless creature. It was noticeably in pain, still writhing ever so slightly. He could see his own reflection within its large dark eye sockets but couldn't tell if it was even aware of his presence.

Michael had positioned himself so that Jarik, Amaya, and his father couldn't see his hands since he needed to make contact with the creature's wrist to slip on the bracelet.

His hands easily passed through the energy barrier, causing his skin to tingle where it made contact, and he gently grasped the creature's right arm.

It trembled slightly but otherwise made no move to stop him.

Its scaly skin felt rough, slick, and cold. It wasn't a particularly pleasant experience but he knew he didn't have a choice.

"It's all right," he whispered. "I'll get you out of this."

He slipped the device onto its wrist where they had removed it earlier when they had first moved it to the cargo bay. He followed Daystrom's instructions he hoped would reactivate the device, sending a homing beacon back toward the subspace realm the creature originated from. Xylion in the meantime readjusted the jamming frequencies that kept the device from operating correctly.

"I'm assuming that you can use this device to call your people and have them bring you back," Michael said to it quietly. "I'm not sure if you can understand what I'm saying to you but you must use it now to leave this place. If you stay here, I cannot guarantee your safety."

"Let's get on with this," Michael heard Jarik say behind him. "I'm not particularly fond of keeping the creature suffering either. The quicker we get this done, the better for everyone."

"Nearly there," Michael said loudly and then felt the device vibrate slightly, which he hoped was a good sign. "Get out of here now," he whispered again. "Go."

But the creature hardly even stirred.

"Come on, Michael, let's get a move on with this," Jon Owen said and he could hear him starting to step up to him.

Left with no other choice, he stood back up. "Go," he whispered again, more urgently this time.

Still nothing.

He turned around and shot Daystrom and Xylion puzzled looks but judging by their expressions, it was clear that they had no answers to offer.

"Did you give the creature a stimulant?" Jarik asked, pointing at the hypo he was still holding.

Michael looked at it.

"What's happening?" Jon Owens said sounding concerned as he stepped closer to the force field.

Michael turned around to find what had startled his father and then saw it too. The prisoner was beginning to fade away. He took a few steps back.

"It appears the creature is returning to its home dimension," said Xylion.

Jarik didn't like the sound of that. "Stop it."

"There is nothing we can do," Daystrom said.

And, within moments, the creature had entirely disappeared.

"I cannot believe this," Jarik said, unable to keep his anger out of his voice.

"We should be lucky we got anything out of it," Jon Owens said. "Let's analyze what we have and see if it is useful at all."

But Jarik didn't move from his spot and continued to stare at where their prisoner had been just moments before. He looked up at Michael who did his level best to appear as dumbfounded as he was. Truth be told, however, he had never been a great actor.

Jon Owens was not a man to dwell on his failures and was already halfway to the cargo bay doors. "Jarik, let's go, I want to

review what we've learned. Michael, I don't think we'll require your services any longer. Why don't you go back to Piquis and get your people? We'll catch up when you return."

Jarik considered the two science officers. "The creature was not supposed to be able to reestablish contact with its home dimension while we were jamming the frequencies."

Daystrom seemed to be at a loss for words to cover what they had done and Michael worried about Xylion who as a Vulcan was famously incapable of lying.

"There is still much we do not understand about the subspace aliens. There is a possibility that they found alternative means to retrieve their missing kinsman," Xylion said with his usually stoic facial expression.

"Goddamnit," Jarik said, demonstrating a noticeable emotional disparity between the two Vulcans and their divergent philosophies. Jarik offered Michael a final look before he quickly followed Jon Owens out of the cargo bay.

Amaya, however, was not as easily fooled. She stepped right up to him and looked him straight in the eye. And apparently, she found what she was looking for there. "Where's the comm device we removed from the creature?"

"It must have been recalled along with the alien," Michael said. Not an all-out lie, but obviously, not entirely the truth either.

"I see."

They continued to stare at each other as if they had engaged in a contest of will. Michael was determined to hold her penetrating gaze.

"I know what you did, Michael."

He said nothing.

"Mister Daystrom, let's return to *Agamemnon*," she said without ever taking her eyes off her fellow starship captain. "I have a feeling we'll be having words."

The young science officer visibly swallowed. "Yes, ma'am."

It felt like an eternity until Maya finally turned on her heel and strode out of the cargo bay with her science officer in tow.

Michael didn't envy Daystrom for the uncomfortable conversation that was likely in store for him. It was a small sacrifice for saving a sentient being's life, he decided.

He considered his own science officer who along with the security detachment was the only person left in the cargo bay. "Somebody once told me that Vulcans don't lie. I guess I must have been misinformed."

"Not all, Captain. However, exaggerating the truth is not outside the scope of our abilities."

Michael offered him a rare clasp on the back as they both headed toward the exit. "Mister Xylion, you never cease to surprise me."

#### 4

Not long after she had piloted the shuttle back to the medical facility after their daring rescue mission in the city, Tazla walked Culsten straight into the small administrative office and locked the doors behind them.

She could tell that the young Krellonina was exhausted, in all truth, just watching his unconventional, sky-bound rescue from the safety of the shuttle had worn her out, but she had a feeling that time was not on their side. "All right, Mister, I know you're beat, but I need to know what you know. What have you learned from your aunt?"

He took a chair by one of the empty desks. "I'm not sure how useful any of it will be to you."

"Give me the highlights."

He nodded. "She's planning something big," he said and then sighed. "First and foremost, you have to understand that Garla truly cares for her people. Not just Krellonians but Outlanders as well. She understands, perhaps better than most, that the atrocities my people have committed against the Outlanders have not just damaged their people but irrevocably corrupted ours as well."

Tazla suppressed an urge to roll her eyes. "Fine, so she has good intentions. Problem is, a lot of terrible people in history started out that way. The humans have a saying for it."

"Humans have a saying for everything."

"What's her solution? If she thinks your society as a whole is

beyond repair, how is she planning to move forward and avoid that civil war I keep hearing whispers of?"

He shook his head. "I'm not entirely sure, she hasn't shared that part of her plan yet. I think she was about to."

"Spilt milk."

He offered her a puzzled look.

"Another one of those pesky human sayings," she said and waved it off. "What is it you do know?"

"She calls it a stand-alone society. She wants to separate Krellonians and Offworlders. She believes that is the only way to avoid all-out civil unrest and maybe even internal war."

"Segregation? That's her plan?"

"It just may work."

But Tazla was entirely unconvinced. "Admittedly, I'm no great scholar of history, but I can't think of a single time segregating societies along racial lines has ever been a solution. If anything, it has only ever caused greater problems and inherently unjust societies. It's not a step forward, Lif. Segregation is a step back."

"We already have an inherently unjust society, perhaps taking a few steps back is the only way my people can move forward."

The entire notion felt just plain wrong to her. "Okay, so Garla's solution is that instead of trying to face the past of her people and coming to terms with it so that all races within the Star Alliance can move forward together, she wants to pick the easy route and just separate everyone like misbehaving schoolchildren?"

Culsten nodded but said nothing.

Tazla realized that this wasn't the time for philosophical questions about social experimentation and moved on. "Even if this were possible, how is she planning on pulling this off? She's not exactly in a position to effect such sweeping social changes by herself? She's an intelligence officer, not a politician."

"She's getting help, that much I know. And it's coming from outside the Alliance. I'm not sure about the details but she has a couple of large, asteroid-based facilities within the system where she is producing some sort of valuable materials. I think that's how she's paying for whatever assistance she is getting in return."

This she immediately recognized as extremely valuable intelligence. It was very possible that this arrangement was the

reason *Eagle* had been dispatched to Piquis in the first place. The theory that certain elements within the Krellonian Star Alliance were assisting the subspace aliens to plan an invasion may have been true after all. It seemed too convenient to be a coincidence. "What do you know about Garla's foreign partners?"

He shook his head again. "Nothing at all. She hasn't spoken about them. All I know is that they appear to be somewhere within the Amargosa Diaspora."

"How?"

It didn't require a counselor to tell that he didn't wish to reveal how he had come to possess this knowledge. "There was an incident with a hijacked freighter that Garla asked me to assist with. Let's just say things didn't go smoothly. Her main priority was to make sure it got to where it needed to go, no matter the price."

She had a good idea of what that cost may have been. "And you know where it went?"

"I know the direction. Garla had me program a course. It's not enough to pinpoint its exact destination..."

She nodded. "But it gives us a possible place to start. Well done, Lif. I know you've been through hell over the last few days, but what you've learned may just make a real difference."

"Mind telling me what that might be? Other than having my very skilled and dangerous aunt gunning for my head?"

"I'm sorry, Lif, I can't. Go get some rest. You'll probably need your strength again before long. I also need you to put everything you've learned into a report, in case there are any details you've missed that may be relevant. I don't have to tell you that this needs to be treated as eyes-only for now."

He got the hint, offered a sharp nod, and left the room.

Tazla only considered the implications of what she had learned for a brief moment. Putting together Culsten's intel with what she had learned about Garla's facilities and Jarik's theories, the picture that was being painted was a scary one indeed. She understood her first priority had to be to warn the captain. He needed to know what they were up against.

Since this part of space didn't exactly maintain the most cordial relationship with the Federation and as *Eagle* was also no longer in the sector, real-time communications were not possible. All she could

do was to send a message via subspace, once again being careful about her word choice, and then hope that it would find its way past local screeners, through the interference-heavy Diaspora, and eventually to *Eagle*.

She had been unsuccessful as of late sending any subspace messages from Piquis and she had worried that she had not been able to share with Owens her most recent and immensely significant discoveries.

Thankfully, Chella had been able to pull some strings for her and she finally managed to get a message out even if she didn't get very far. Halfway through the communiqué the line suddenly terminated. She had a good idea who was responsible for this.

The doors to the room opened and Nora Laas came rushing in, followed by a clearly agitated chief administrator, who had stayed behind ever since the vaccine had been created, ostensibly to assist in her daughter's recovery.

"We have a problem," Nora said without preamble.

Tazla stood and faced the two women. "I assume it's related to the comms blackout."

Chella nodded. "I've just had word that the Eye is mobilizing several strike teams. And they're heading our way by ground and air."

Tazla frowned. "Garla is making a move against us. I thought we had more time."

"Time's run out," Nora said. "They'll be on us in less than twenty minutes and from what I hear, they're sending enough people to have us significantly outmanned."

"I may be able to buy you some time," Chella said. "I can have my security forces attempt to stall Garla but it won't be by much. I cannot risk open conflict with the Eye of Krellon."

"I appreciate anything you can do, Chief Administrator."

The woman nodded and offered a small smile. "I am in your debt, Commander. I believe all of Piquis is. I'll do whatever I can," she said and then quickly left the room, no doubt to organize her mini-rebellion.

"What do we do?" Nora asked once they were alone.

Tazla took a moment to look around, taking in the medical facility they had been able to set up on a world that had mostly

treated them with indifference and hostility when they had first arrived. Considering what they had been up against, she could not deny a certain sense of pride at what they had been able to accomplish in such a short amount of time. She also knew that this was always going to be nothing more than a temporary installation.

"I think we have finally outstayed our welcome, Lieutenant. Time to pack things up and get the hell out of Dodge."

Nora, albeit not human either, did get this adage and nodded. "Understood," she said as she began to follow the first officer out of the room. "I'm just not sure we have enough time or capacity for a full-scale evacuation."

That, Tazla thought as she rushed out of the room to spread the news, was, in fact, the rub, just before she realized that she had been spending far too much time with humans and their idioms.

## 5

*"Doctor Katanga has confirmed a nearly ninety-eight percent success rate in eliminating the virus in stage four and stage five patients, which had been our final hurdle in perfecting the vaccine. We have already begun transferring the patients in this facility to various medical installations around Piquis and its medical community has been fully briefed on how to synthesize the vaccine themselves.*

*Elijah estimates that at the current pace, the Piquis Plague will be fully eradicated within the next two to three weeks. While he would prefer to continue to supervise the medical efforts here, it has become obvious that the Krellonians have things well in hand from here on in."*

Tazla Star paused in her report and Michael could tell from the way her emerald eyes took on a new focus that she considered her next words to have the uttermost importance. In fact, her voice took on a steelier edge, a subtle and perhaps easily missed cue for anyone unfamiliar with her mannerisms and the tone of her voice.

*"Regarding our ongoing personnel issue, I had to take the drastic measure of pulling our officer from all previously allocated assignments. The problem isn't so much with our officer but with how others have reacted to her assignments. I'm sorry to say that irreparable rifts have been caused that*

*could lead to significant repercussions in the very near future. I highly recommend we take immediate action to resolve this situation before it may escalate beyond our ability to manage.*

*Overall, however, I believe our mission here has been successful, and not only have we been able to alleviate a planetary health crisis, but we have also made inroads with certain local leaders and we've been able to partake in a valuable cultural exchange with the Star Alliance."*

Another pause as her eyes briefly left the screen as if to carefully consider her final message.

*"Krellonian/Federation relations may not significantly improve in the short term by our mission here. We're looking at a potential Ketteract scenario. I am however optimistic that we have laid the groundwork for the beginnings of long-term improvements of – "*

The screen winked out and Star's face disappeared, only to be replaced by the Federation seal, indicating that the transmission had ended.

Michael leaned forward in his chair. "Computer, what happened?"

*"The subspace message has ended."*

"In mid-sentence?"

*"The signal was terminated at the source."*

Michael had been afraid of this ever since he had left a team on its own on Piquis. Star had clearly hinted at trouble in her message and now it appeared that trouble had found them quicker than she had anticipated. The good news, for now, was that Star had seemed calm and composed, and there had been no sign of any imminent disasters. Of course, that in itself didn't mean that one hadn't befallen her and her team. But even if it was just a matter of somebody locally jamming comms, this surely meant things were only going to get worse. Cutting his team off from the outside world would be the first step to taking more direct action against them. He needed to get back there as soon as possible.

"Computer, send an immediate and high priority request for a status update on the situation on Piquis to our facility located there, as well as to the local and central Krellonian governments, Starfleet Command, and to the Federation Diplomatic Service."

*"Request sent."*

It was little more than a formality and he held out little to no hope it would accomplish much. A message back to Piquis and the Krellonian homeworld would take hours to deliver, and Federation officials would not be in a position to take any action any sooner than he would be able to.

*"Owens to Xylion."*

"This is Lieutenant Commander Xylion."

"Commander, set a course for the Piquis system and stand-by to engage at maximum warp."

*"Aye, sir."*

"What's our ETA if we leave right away?"

*"Nineteen hours and fifty-four minutes, sir."*

It felt like an eternity and if Star was in as much trouble as he suspected, it may as well have been. "Thank you, Commander. Stay ready to engage. Owens out."

There had been something else about her message that had startled him slightly. Something that had seemed out of place. He was fairly confident that her update on the cure to the virus was entirely genuine with no additional added subtext since it was in line with her previous status reports.

The officer with the personnel issue was an obvious reference to Lif Culsten's assignment to learn more about his aunt's designs. Her implications seemed to make it clear that the assignment had ended badly and he had to assume that this was the reason for the latest crisis. From what he had learned, Garla was a powerful enough individual to put the entire away team at significant risk.

But there had been one more veiled hint in Star's cryptic message that bothered him. She had used a name that had sounded immediately familiar but that he couldn't quite place.

"Computer, show me all references to the name Ketteract."

A soft trill acknowledged his request and was immediately followed by a long list of people and places with that name displayed on his computer screen. One of them stood out from the rest.

"Display data on Doctor Bendes Ketteract."

The computer acknowledged again before displaying the file of a twenty-third-century Federation scientist. Or at least something that resembled a file. He had been doing this long enough to immediately recognize a heavily redacted record.

“Computer, declassify file.”

This time the computer responded with a startling warning sound and instead of displaying more data, the entire screen now showed a large blue Greek letter. The cold shudder running up his spine at seeing the ominous message told him immediately what this meant.

There were a few things no starship captain ever wanted to face. Encountering the Borg was fairly high on that list, as were the inevitable complications of time travel. This, he felt, rivaled both scenarios.

“Son of a bitch,” he said and was already out of his chair and heading toward the doors, not even bothering to try and access any more of the file he had requested.

He crossed onto the bridge and could see Xylion already vacating the command chair but he didn’t slow down on his way to the turbolift. “Commander, advise my father that I need to speak to him immediately. I’m on my way to transporter room two now.”

“Understood, sir.”

He had hoped he would never, in his career, have to deal with the Omega Molecule, the incredibly powerful substance able to destroy subspace on a galactic scale. Even worse, however, he strongly suspected that he and Star were not the first ones to learn about its presence in Krellonian space.

He was furious at the idea that Jarik and his father had kept this from him. For all their assurances of transparency, he realized he should have known better.

This development could change everything and with his people stuck squarely in the middle of one of the worst nightmares imaginable.

## 6

“Keep an eye on the hemoglobin levels in stage three and four patients. The rate at which the average Krellonian is able to carry oxygen within their blood is impressive compared to other humanoid races but we have seen early signs of hypoxia brought on by acute

immune system failure in several patients in the later stages of the disease. You should be able to correct this easily enough if detected early by increasing arterial pO<sub>2</sub> levels. Here's a list of some of our patients with lower-than-normal blood oxygen content."

Tazla had intercepted Elijah Katanga, briefing the Krellonian head physician Urnae Turee just in time to overhear his latest instructions, and Elijah handing his colleague several data padds. The two men were walking side-by-side and far too leisurely for her liking.

"All right, let's wrap it up. Eli, you should've been on the last shuttle," she said sternly as she stepped behind them.

He shot her a dark glare, obviously not appreciating being rushed. On this occasion, she couldn't have cared less and she pointed at one of the few Starfleet shuttles still on the ground. "I want you on that one, double time."

"I still haven't finished briefing Doctor Turee here on some of the details about the vaccine administration."

But Tazla was already steering Elijah toward the waiting shuttle, which was visibly packed with other members of the away team. "I'm sure the good doctor has things in hand from here on in, Eli."

Turee nodded quickly. "Indeed, you've done the hard work, Doctor, and we are quite appreciative of all your efforts. Even though I have to admit that I'm still quite curious about how you made the connection to boronite poisoning being the catalyst for the disease."

Tazla answered before Eli had the chance. "Sometimes we just get lucky," she said and then glanced back at her friend. "Your carriage awaits, sir," she said, putting a little more pressure on the hand she was resting on his back and using to guide him into the direction she wanted him to go.

He huffed in protest. "I'm not a child, Dez, I know the way."

"Of course," she said with a smirk and then considered the Krellonian doctor once more. "I believe your own vessel is ready for take-off as well," she added and gestured at a second shuttle, this one larger and slightly sleeker than the Starfleet vessel. It was being boarded by the remaining Krellonian medical personnel, patients, and security forces while chief administrator Chella stood by its

extended entry ramp, personally ensuring everybody got on board safely.

Turee remained rooted to the spot for a moment as if hoping to get a better answer to the miraculous medical breakthrough Katanga and the Starfleet team had achieved.

"I'm sure none of us would still want to be here once those Eye troops arrive," she said as she ensured Elijah was boarding the shuttle, keeping her eyes on his Krellonian colleague.

That was enough to spur him into action, he offered a nod and then quickly headed for his shuttle.

"What about you?" Elijah said once he had climbed the ramp at the rear of the compact Starfleet ship. "I'm sure they won't be happy to find you here either."

"Don't worry, we'll find a way off this planet in plenty of time," she said, displaying the kind of effortless confidence that people expected from a first officer even if it was almost entirely for show.

Eli's piercing gaze seemed to make it clear that he was seeing through the bluff easily.

"Besides, it's a bit too tight in there for me," she said, as she considered the jam-packed interior. She rapped hard against the hull with her fist before Eli had a chance to offer any more protests.

"That's it, let's get this thing off the ground and out of here. Head straight for the rendezvous coordinates," she barked at the pilot who was sitting at the controls and was entirely obstructed from view by the many passengers crammed inside the shuttle.

The message got through, however, and the ramp began to rise in preparation for lift-off.

"Don't make me come back for you," Eli said just before the hatch sealed shut and the shuttle began to take off into the cloudy sky.

She watched for a moment and witnessed the Krellonian shuttle following suit, this one heading back toward the city, instead of following the Starfleet ship that had orders to make best speed out of Star Alliance territory in the wake of those who had already preceded it.

She was surprised to find that Chella had not boarded the Krellonian shuttle herself.

The woman noticed Tazla's puzzled expression. "Don't be concerned about me. Garla and I may not be on the best of terms, but even a Sentinel would have to answer some difficult questions if she targeted a planetary administrator."

Taz nodded appreciatively at her support, even though she was fairly certain that at this point they needed more than the assistance the chief administrator could offer to get out of this mess in one piece.

Nora Laas joined them moments later. "That's it. Last shuttle's gone. We've still got twenty-five people on the ground though."

"Any chance we can beam out of here?" she asked.

Nora shook her head. "Transporter scramblers are already in effect."

"Interesting that those showed up the moment we learned Garla is making her move."

"I've heard of those tactics being employed by the Eye before," Chella said. "It may indicate that she wants to make sure she captures prisoners."

"That, or she doesn't want us to get out of here alive," Nora said.

"Let's try not to find out which option she's after," said Tazla and considered the chief administrator. "How do we look on hitching a ride out of here on one of your ships?"

Chella didn't look optimistic. "Providing you with a ship is not the problem. But with transporters not being an option, getting it out here before Garla's people show up is not very likely."

"Which means we'll have a fight on our hands," Nora said, lifting her phaser rifle as if to stress her point. "We've kept all our combat-trained people behind for a reason."

Chella quickly shook her head. "That would be suicide. Eye operatives are highly trained and will outnumber your men ten-to-one."

"So what do you suggest? That we surrender?" Nora said, making it fairly obvious that she had meant the question to be purely rhetorical and Tazla was sure she knew why. The Bajoran had been a fighter all her life, battling the Cardassians on her homeworld from the day she had been old enough to hold a weapon. Surrender was simply not in her vocabulary.

The chief administrator could likely see this too and chose to address Tazla instead. "I cannot condone you using violence against my people, Commander. I will assist you any way I can, I believe I owe you that much, both personally as well as on behalf of all the people of Piquis, but if you choose to resort to lethal force against my people, I cannot stand beside you."

Tazla understood she had to make a decision and it wasn't going to be an easy one. They had only just made inroads with the Krellonians, a feat even the Federation's top diplomats hadn't been able to accomplish over a few centuries. Sure, they had made new enemies as well, but she simply wasn't yet willing to throw it all away. Not if she could help it. Besides, the only plausible exit strategy she could come up with required Chella's support. "We'll try it your way," she said, nodding at the administrator.

"Commander, I don't see how that is going to work," Nora protested. "You've heard what she has said. These are extremely well-trained operatives we're up against."

"Last I checked, Lieutenant, we have our own elite force on hand. And if I had to bet on a side, I'll choose our people every day of the week. We'll just have to be smarter and more creative than our opposition."

Nora seemed to know when an argument was lost, but that didn't stop her from appearing anything but encouraged by Tazla's plan.

## 7

Using high-powered, sensor-enhanced binoculars, Tazla watched as the cavalcade of armed troop transports came barreling down into the quarry some eight hundred meters out from their temporary medical facility.

"Right on schedule," she said as she followed the three heavy vehicles taking the steep, downward incline at high velocity, bouncing gently on their six large rubber tires. From the size of those transports, she guessed that each of them carried at least twenty,

possibly thirty troops, far too many to take on in combat, even if she hadn't already committed to a non-lethal approach.

"The terrain should slow them down somewhat," said Nora Laas who stood next to her, watching the same scene with her own binoculars.

"Not by much, considering their hurry getting to us."

"I think their impatience may turn to our advantage."

Tazla nodded. "Are they in position yet?"

It took Nora a moment to find out. "Any second now."

She continued to watch the Krellonian transports edge closer to the facility as they were negotiating the tricky approach, keeping up their high speed.

When they had first chosen this site for the hospital, Tazla hadn't been convinced that this old stone quarry was a suitable location, with its many winding access roads that required time and patience to enter or exit the pit. In the end, it had turned out to be a mostly non-issue since they had relied on transporters and shuttles on the few occasions they had been required to leave the facility and in fact now, when they desperately needed to buy time for an evacuation, the remote location and inhospitable topography had become a blessing in disguise.

"Here we go," Nora said.

Tazla quickly focused on the lead vehicle and the sharp, downward-facing bend it was approaching. She thought the vehicle was going too fast even in the best of conditions, not to mention on a gravelly and unsecured road.

Two figures popped out from nowhere. Using the binoculars she could make out the bald human and the snout-nosed Tellarite, both handling heavy weapons that most certainly were not Starfleet standard issue.

She didn't know if the driver had spotted the two SMT operators hiding within the small ditch at the side of the road but she was fairly sure that even if they had been seen, it was already far too late to do anything about it.

Just before the first vehicle reached the outer curve of the bend, both operatives opened fire, squarely targeting the lead vehicle's large forward tires which were instantly shredded under the high-power bombardment.

The transport dropped onto its bare wheels and lost both speed and the ability to maneuver. This, in turn, caused the vehicle following it closely to barrel nose-first into the back of the lead vehicle, and not a moment later the third transport hit the back of the second.

There was an almost poetic beauty to watching the unfolding smash-up of multiple tons of metal and steel unfold, Tazla thought. Without the ability to steer into the bend, the lead vehicle simply skittered straight ahead and down a good ten-meter drop into the quarry. The second vehicle had wedged itself into the first and had no choice but to follow right along. The third vehicle remained free enough to maneuver but was forced to oversteer to still have any chance to make the turn. The transport was too heavy to corner as sharply as it needed and so instead it tipped over onto two wheels and then toppled over altogether before sliding down into the quarry and after the other two transports, all of which eventually came to a stop at the very bottom of the pit in a heap of mangled steel and blown-up dust.

“Ah, that’s got to hurt,” Nora said and Tazla could hear the smile in her voice.

“Casualties?”

“Bruises and broken bones but all life signs remain stable,” said Lieutenant T’Nerr, one of Nora’s security officers who kept his eyes on a tricorder. The Caitian was almost purring his words.

“I bet they’re going to be mad as hell,” said Skyler McIntyre, another security specialist who had stayed behind to try and buy the remaining Starfleet team the time they needed to escape.

“To say the least.” Tazla could see no immediate sign that anyone was trying to exit the crashed troop transports, for now, they were no doubt still licking their wounds. She could also no longer see the SMT operators. Hopefully, they were already high-tailing it toward the rallying point.

“Two new contacts, ten o’clock, high,” Nora said.

Tazla turned to see two Krellonian shuttles emerge from the clouds and descending toward them. Even with the sparse amount of sunlight making its way through the seemingly perpetual overcast skies, the shuttles’ chrome hulls glinted noticeably.

“This trick is not going to work twice,” she said.

“Wait, there’s a third shuttle,” Nora said.

Tazla could see it too. But this one looked oddly familiar. It was clearly Krellonian as well but it didn’t quite fit in with the other two and it was certainly not flying in the same formation. Instead, this one had appeared above both of them and seemed to be creeping dangerously close to the other shuttles.

They tried to move out of the way when the pilots realized that the third vessel was on a collision course but couldn’t engage evasive maneuvers in time. The resulting bump was forceful enough to cause one of the shuttles to rapidly lose altitude and navigational control. The pilot attempted to recover but in the end, it did little more than soften the shuttle’s crash landing on the quarry floor.

The second shuttle recovered more easily from the collision and kept in the air.

“That’s all I can ask them to do, I’m afraid.”

Tazla turned around to see Chella who stood nearby, still holding a communicator, doubtlessly speaking directly to the pilot of her vessel. She had purposefully kept her final shuttle behind for just this maneuver. “I need to get my people out of here.”

Tazla gave her a grateful nod. “Understood. Your assistance has been greatly appreciated. Your shuttle did what it needed to do.”

“And it’s delivered its payload,” Nora said.

Tazla turned back around to focus on the still approaching Eye shuttle with her binoculars. She just got a glimpse of the figure now riding on the back of it, right on top of its engine compartment. Her bright purple hair tied closely to her head gave her away. But just moments after she had spotted the SMT operator and her death-defying stunt, the woman had already jumped off the shuttle, using her anti-grav boots to sail back gracefully toward the ground.

Not a moment after she had jumped, the engine compartment of the shuttle began to sputter and then erupt in flames before several small explosions ripped it to pieces. The shuttle had enough momentum to correct course and avoid a head-first crash into the ground, but it was clear that it too, had to make an emergency landing nowhere near where it had planned to come down.

“Too soon to celebrate, I’m afraid. We’ve got another contact, two o’clock high. It’s another shuttle coming in fast.”

Tazla quickly turned to locate the shuttle and found it exactly where the Bajoran security officer had placed it, breaking through the cloud cover at high speeds and angling right for their location as if it had been held back in reserve for exactly this kind of situation.

"I'm all out of tricks," Chella said.

Tazla was fairly sure that there wasn't much else they could do to keep that last vessel from touching down.

"I guess now we've got little choice but to fight our way out of this," Nora said.

Tazla watched as the shuttle landed just fifty meters or so from their facility, a good two dozen heavily armed operatives quickly emerging from the transport and beginning their approach.

She lowered her binoculars to glance to her side where Nora along with T'Nerr and McIntyre had brought up their phaser rifles, aiming at the incoming soldiers. It would have been a pretty one-sided affair. "Hold your fire."

"We could take out a few of them," the Bajoran said. "Even if we just stun them."

Tazla glanced at Chella and it was clear what she was thinking. Federation officers opening fire on Krellonian troops, on a Krellonian colony, wouldn't exactly endear Starfleet to Krellonian leadership. Sure, they had already fired on their vessels and directly damaged one of their shuttles, not to mention the roof of an Eye building in the city, but so far, any injuries arising from those actions could still be argued away as incidental. Directed fire on Krellonian operatives would be much harder to explain. "How long until our ride gets here?"

"A few more minutes, at least," the chief administrator said.

"We don't have a few more minutes," said Nora, still taking aim through the viewfinder of her phaser rifle.

"Maybe we do." Tazla found Hopkins, the chief engineer was one of the few Starfleet away team members still waiting to be evacuated.

Hopkins nodded and brought up a padd she was holding.

"It's gotta be now or never," said Nora.

Tazla raised her binoculars again to survey the scene they were facing. Those troops had just cleared the large moat-like ditch that

separated the facility from the wider quarry and were now moments away from reaching the hospital proper. "Hold it."

"Commander?" Nora warned, the urgency in her voice impossible to miss.

"Not yet."

The Bajoran's little sigh was evidence that she disagreed with waiting any longer. Her discipline stayed her hand.

Tazla knew she had to time this just right. "Hold it."

The facility was now almost entirely surrounded; anybody who remained inside would be unable to escape without trying to get past Garla's troops.

She finally nodded. "All right. Light it."

"Here it goes," the engineer said and activated her padd.

Tazla lowered her binoculars and watched on as the entire medical facility they had built in such record time and that had functioned as their home for the last few days, blew itself to pieces in a series of explosions, causing the surprised troops honing in on it to jump for cover. Some of the operatives had been close enough to be flattened, and perhaps even singed by the sudden explosions and shockwaves but from what she could see – safely positioned on top of a nearby ridge – nobody had been seriously harmed.

She turned again when she heard the roaring engines behind her and found another Krelloninan shuttle approaching and setting down just a few paces behind them. She held her breath for a moment until Chella nodded reassuringly. Their getaway vehicle had finally arrived.

"All right, people, let's double-time it out of here," she said to the twenty-something remaining members of her away team as she pointed at the shuttle's opening hatch.

Nobody needed to be told twice and within moments everyone had boarded the vessel.

Symbolically, Tazla had wanted her boots to be the last ones to touch Piquis soil since she was the ranking Starfleet officer, but that wasn't quite meant to be. The moment she had stepped on board, it was Violet, the anti-grav equipped SMT operator who came flying out of the sky and pretty much dropped straight into the shuttle.

Then, even as the ship was already starting to power up again, Sensy and Charm came running up the hill, the Tellarite moving

surprisingly quickly considering his stoutness and much shorter legs. He was also the first of the two to jump onboard.

Nora leaned out and stretched her arm as far as it would go for the SMT team leader even after the shuttle had already started to push off. "Need a lift?"

He managed to grab her hand in full stride. "Only if you're going my way."

She pulled him inside. "How about anywhere but here?"

He nodded. "I'll take it," he said and boarded the shuttle in mid-departure, his feet already well off the ground before he had managed to get all the way inside.

Once Tazla was happy that everyone was safely on-board and the hatch was beginning to close again, she made her way to the front of the small ship and toward the open cockpit where Chella was standing behind the pilot and Lif Culsten who had taken the other seat.

She could see through the canopy that they were already breaking through the thick clouds as they ascended steeply into the skies and headed for orbit.

Culsten who must have had his eyes on sensors began to shake his head. "Definitely not yet in the clear. I'm seeing several combat-equipped shuttles being scrambled from the direction of the asteroid field. Looks like they're coming after us."

Chella shot him a puzzled look. "Those aren't mine. Where'd Garla hide those?"

Culsten shrugged. Of course, Tazla had a very good idea of where those shuttles had their base. She didn't see any point in sharing this information now. "Make best speed to the rendezvous point. We'll just have to try and outrun them."

In truth, she already knew that the chances of getting out of Krellonian space that easy were slim to none. And enviably, slim had already left Piquis well ahead of them.

## 8

News of his arrival had, apparently, traveled slowly and Michael found nobody waiting for him but the transporter operator after he

had beamed onto the outpost. Still remembering the way to his father's office, he refused to wait for a welcome committee and walked straight out of the room, ignoring the young officer behind the console, asking him to wait for somebody to come and collect him. He was long passed waiting for anyone.

He saw Jarik coming down the corridor shortly after he had left the transporter room, probably to meet him. "Michael?"

He didn't stop, didn't even slow down. "I need to speak to my father, right now."

The other man turned to follow, perhaps a bit surprised by Michael's single-mindedness, and then quickly caught up with him. "To be honest, this isn't a great time. We have quite a bit to prepare now that—"

"Jarik, let me be frank. I don't particularly care if this is a convenient time or not. After all the crap you've pulled, I believe you owe me big time."

He didn't even try to argue that point. "Can you at least tell me what this is about?"

Michael kept his pace. "You'll find out soon enough."

Not a few moments later, he reached the doors Jarik had led him to just recently and where he had been reunited with the last person he had ever expected to see alive again. He walked into the room without so much as announcing his presence. Inside, he found his father sitting behind a desk and Amaya Donners standing nearby, both apparently in the middle of a conversation.

"Good, we're all here."

"Son, we're a little busy at the moment," his father said upon seeing Michael arrive unexpectedly. It wasn't difficult to tell that he wasn't exactly pleased by this rude interruption. "I thought you were already on your way back to Piquis to get your people."

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "I'll be on my way shortly but first there is something I need to know. I promise it won't take long."

Owens Senior nodded. "Very well, son. Go ahead."

Of course, at this point, his father's approval was the last thing he was concerned about. He glanced at his expecting face as well as the one belonging to Maya and Jarik. Three people he had once thought he had known intimately well. Now, he just wasn't quite so sure anymore. Maybe he had never understood his father to begin

with, after all the things he had done it wasn't difficult to argue that point. And perhaps he had never truly known Amaya Donners, even back during their Academy years when they had been practically inseparable, maybe even after their relationship had blossomed to something beyond friendship in recent years. Maybe there had always been a different, darker side to her she had kept well hidden from him. The thought scared him but he knew he wasn't able to rule it out.

And who could say about Jarik? A man he hadn't seen or spoken to in decades. As with Maya, they had met when they had both been young men, children, really, and youthful naïveté had made it easy to be ignorant of dishonesty and the sinister side of people. Or perhaps, in his case, it had been something he had acquired much later and long after they had built their early friendship.

"I need to know why you let me and my crew head into Krellonian space knowing that we would come across the Omega Molecule, without any kind of warning or preparation." He let those words hang there for a moment as he studied the faces of the three Starfleet officers in the room with him.

It was Amaya who cracked first. Jarik seemed to be able to draw on his Vulcan side to keep his expression stone-faced and no doubt his father had plenty of experience in that regard after heading one of Starfleet's most clandestine and enigmatic agencies for years. Maya did not have that benefit. She didn't say anything but the look in her eyes made it clear beyond a doubt that she had known. That they had all known.

Ultimately even his father realized the futility of trying to keep up the charade. "Son, you have to understand that we're up against a force of —"

"Dad, spare me the doom and gloom speech about threats and consequences. I've been fully briefed on the threat Omega can pose to an entire quadrant and beyond. What I don't get is why all this goddamned secrecy? You could have been upfront with me from the beginning, instead of playing these stupid little games," he said and then glared at Jarik. "I take it that speech you gave me about being more transparent and taking a different tact than my father was all just another level of subterfuge."

"It's a little bit more complicated than that," Jarik said.

"Sure it is. Turns out my father is alive, and you three are engaged in some sort of conspiracy to get your hands on the Omega Molecule, is that it?"

Amaya quickly shook her head. "Michael, it's not a conspiracy. Now, listen to me, this is really important. Where did you locate Omega?"

"Yes, nothing about this looks like a conspiracy," he said unable to keep the irony out of his voice as the three of them looked at him expectantly, almost like vultures hungering for their next meal. Or in this case, for the information he had in his possession directly relating to one of the most dangerous and most powerful substances in the known galaxy.

"Just answer the question, son."

He glared at his father for a moment. "My first officer appears to have come across it."

"On Piquis?" Maya said and then looked back at his father, clearly frustrated. "I told you I should've been the one to go. I'm the only one here with any real-world experience dealing with Omega."

But Jon Owens shook his head. "Even so, they would never even have let you get close. It had to be him."

"Tell me something, was anything you've told me the truth?" Michael said, trying hard to keep his anger in check, even while it was threatening to bubble over. "This subspace portal, the invasion, any of it?"

"Both things are very real, son."

Michael had a hard time believing this. "You know what, it doesn't even matter anymore. I'm going to get my people back and then I'm leaving you to this entire mess. I'm done being a pawn in your games," he said and turned around.

"Son, wait."

He didn't. Instead, he stepped out of the room and hit his combadge as soon as the doors had closed behind him. "Owens to *Eagle*, one person to beam up." He didn't even have the patience to walk all the way back to the transporter room. "Energize when ready."

He was back on his ship within heartbeats, bounding off the platform and back out in the corridor, heading for the bridge. "Owens to Xylion, are we ready to get underway?"

*"Yes, sir," the Vulcan immediately responded. "However, we have just received word from Admiral Owens that he wishes to join us. He has asked permission to come aboard."*

Hardly surprising. Michael chose to ignore the request. "He can get his own ride. I want to leave orbit now and head to the Star Alliance border at best possible speed," he said as he strode toward the turbolift.

*"Understood, sir. Before we get underway, I have a suggestion to make."*

Michael was tempted to ignore it as well, however, something told him not to disregard a recommendation from his science officer out of hand. They tended to have value. "Go ahead."

*"Am I right in assuming, sir, that our objective is to reach our away team on Piquis VII in the fastest possible manner?"*

Michael stepped into the turbolift and ordered for it to head to the bridge. "That would be correct."

*"In which case, I would suggest we avail ourselves of all and any devices that could expedite our journey."*

It took him a moment to realize what Xylion was alluding to. He felt a smile tugging on his lips just as the doors opened and he stepped onto the bridge. Xylion already waiting for him there. "Excellent suggestion, Commander," he said and then turned his attention toward his on-duty flight officer. "Ensign Srena, break orbit and get us back to where we parked our warp sled. Best speed."

## 9

"I'm now reading six combat shuttles and one corvette in pursuit. We have comparable engines, it might be possible that they will be unable to catch up to us before we reach the border," the shuttle pilot said while keeping her eyes on the helm controls.

"That corvette belongs to Garla," said Chella who still stood with Star just behind the pilot and Culsten.

“To be honest, I’d be more worried about what’s in front of us instead,” Culsten said, monitoring sensors. “At least eight border patrol vessels are converging on our heading. Now those will definitely intercept us before we get out of Star Alliance space.”

Tazla tried to get a glimpse over his shoulder to read the same data he was seeing but it wasn’t easy to make sense of the unfamiliar console layout and language. She had worked as a clandestine operative in Starfleet Intelligence long enough, however, to make out the basics. They were still heading on the quickest possible course toward Federation space via the Amargosa Diaspora. The rest of their small fleet of shuttles carrying the remainder of the away team was just a few minutes ahead of them. The border patrol ships Culsten had mentioned were going to cut them all off before they could cross the border into safety. Turning around, for obvious reasons, wasn’t an option.

She considered the chief administrator next to her. “These border ships, will they listen to your orders? Will they let us pass if you ask them to?”

The woman shook her head. “My jurisdiction ended when we left the Piquis system. And even if they did listen to me, orders coming from a sentinel will have significantly more weight than mine.”

“I was worried you’d say something like that,” Tazla said. She had, of course, already run into the Krellonian border agency once before, when she and *Eagle* had attempted to enter Star Alliance space. Considering how much trouble they’ve had coming into their territory, she didn’t expect her chances of escaping Garla this way to be encouraging.

“We could try to alter course,” Lif said, turning his head to look at her. “Perhaps lay low somewhere and try to slip over the border someplace else.”

“And have not just Garla and her people chasing us but the border patrol as well.” She shook her head. “Not a promising option.”

“Do you have another one, sir?”

In fact, she didn’t.

Nora joined them in the cockpit area of the shuttle. "These people didn't even want us in their space. Wouldn't they be delighted to see us leave it?"

"After your actions on Piquis, going up directly against Garla, I can't imagine she would want to let you go so easily," Chella said.

"Sir," Culsten said, standing from his station. "I'm the one who betrayed her. She's coming after me. I'll stay behind to face whatever punishment she deems is necessary as long as she agrees to let you and the rest of the away team leave."

Hopkins who was sitting further back in the shuttle had overhead this and quickly walked up to join them. "Wait a minute, you're a Starfleet officer and we don't leave people behind."

"It's me or all of you, Lou. We have no choice. Being a Starfleet officer also means sacrificing yourself for the greater good and the good of your people. It's like the Vulcans say: The needs of the many —"

Tazla cut him off. "As you were, Lieutenant. I appreciate a selfless act as much as the next person, but let's hold off on the self-sacrificing heroics for now. There might be another way out of this."

"But sir, there clearly isn't."

"Why are you so eager for this?" Hopkins said, trying and failing to keep her rising anger in check. "We don't even know if Garla would go for such a deal. As far as she is concerned, she has us dead to rights anyway."

Tazla jumped back in before this could turn into an argument. "Quite right, Lieutenant. Now, everyone settle down. That's an order. And following orders, if you may recall, is another thing Starfleet officers are expected to do."

The Krellonian looked chastened but nodded and sat back down.

Tazla spotted something else on sensors, something that looked familiar. She pointed at it. "What is that?"

Culsten only needed a moment to identify it and then smiled. "It's *Eagle*. She's rapidly approaching the border."

"I have another contact approaching at high warp," the pilot said.

"Let me see." Chella stepped behind the pilot and leaned in to look at her display. "That's councilor Yorlo's vessel. It's heading straight for us."

"Now we've got a party," said Nora.

"Half of the border vessels have changed course to intercept *Eagle*, the others are still heading our way," Lif said.

This was quickly becoming a dangerously combusive situation, Tazla realized. One false step could set off a major interstellar incident. Wars had broken out over much less serious offenses than what they had managed to entangle themselves in. "All right, advise the rest of our people to hold their position. Let's catch up to them and come to a full stop."

The pilot checked with Chella and when she gave her assent, she executed the order. Chella considered the Trill suspiciously.

"What are you planning?"

"We've tried shooting our way out of this and it's only gotten us so far. I think we need to start trying something different. Perhaps talking will help."

"Looks like we're not the only ones interested in talking. Garla's ship is hailing us," Culsten said.

Tazla nodded. "Put her through."

A moment later her image appeared, holographically superimposed on the forward viewport. She still looked outraged. "*Chella, I am ordering you to stop your vessel and immediately hand over Lif Culsten and his Starfleet conspirators who are wanted for questioning in regards to partaking in terrorist acts against the Star Alliance and interfering with Eye operations.*"

"These people were our guests, Sentinel. They came here to assist us with a medical emergency which they have managed to resolve successfully. And now they are returning to Federation space," she said.

"Guests?" Garla nearly spat as if she couldn't believe she had used that word. "*Do guests fire on their hosts? Do they destroy Krellonian property? They lost their status as guests the moment they took up arms against us. Now they are enemies of the state. And Lif Culsten is a traitor to his people.*"

"I think we should write this all off as an unfortunate, cultural misunderstanding," Tazla said, trying the diplomatic route, even if

she doubted she'd get very far with that tact. In her experience, it never quite seemed to work. "We've all made mistakes in this first, real cooperation between our people. But in the end, we did what we came here to do. We helped you cure a disease. Let's focus on that and part ways as friends instead of enemies."

Garla looked at her for a moment as if she was considering those words. A small smirk formed on her thin lips. *"I am starting to believe that all of this was planned from the start. That you came here under false pretenses to spy on Krellonian affairs. At this point, I am not even ruling out that you have somehow managed to cause this disease in the first place just so that you would have a convenient reason to enter the Star Alliance."*

"That is ridiculous," Chella said. "The Piquis Plague broke out many weeks before Starfleet even joined us. Besides, they were invited here by our government."

*"I suppose a court will have to decide. A Krellonian court. And if you don't want to join your new friends in the accusation box as a coconspirator, I suggest you hand them over now and with no further delays."*

Culsten muted the connection and turned around to look at Star. "Sir, I have an idea."

She instinctively shook her head. "We've been through that."

"No, something else. Just hear me out."

She did and she had to admit that she liked where he was going. Even if she hadn't, there weren't exactly a wealth of options left for them since it was becoming clearer by the second that Garla had no intentions of letting any of them go.

A few moments later their shuttle joined the rest of the small Starfleet flotilla now seemingly stuck behind enemy lines and not long after they found themselves surrounded by border patrol ships on one side, and Garla's vessels on the other, all of them taking clearly aggressive stances, ready to open fire at the slightest provocation.

*Eagle* in the meantime had approached the border as closely as they were able without violating Krellonian sovereignty or inviting a hostile response from the remaining patrol ships effectively cutting her off from proceeding any further. The overzealous border agents were also jamming any kind of communications between the Starfleet vessel and her shuttles, which in cosmic terms were within spitting

distance but may as well have been located in a different universe, considering the imaginary line separating them.

When Garla opened frequencies again, Tazla had arranged, with Chella's permission, to clear the shuttle's small cockpit area of everyone save for herself, Culsten, and the chief administrator.

*"There is no place for you to go,"* the sentinel said, clearly still displeased by having been muted earlier. *"This is the end for you. Surrender and I will promise that your people receive a fair trial. Some of your officers may even be repatriated eventually."*

There was little doubt in Tazla's mind that this offer didn't extend to her, as the ranking officer, or Culsten, for whom she was sure she had special plans. "I would like to make you a counteroffer."

Garla uttered a humorless laugh. *"I believe you seriously misjudged your position. There are no counteroffers to be entertained. My terms are non-negotiable."*

"Perhaps that will change once you hear what we have to offer."

Garla didn't speak even if her face spoke volumes. This was a waste of her time.

"Lif here worked with you for a few days and had access to a great deal of information relating to your plans. He also obtained evidence that you have allied yourself with a foreign power in order to achieve your goals," Tazla said. "You have accused Lif to be a traitor to his people. But, tell me, a sentinel of the Eye of Krellon, who has sworn an oath to protect and safeguard the Star Alliance, working with foreign interests without the knowledge or consent of the Central Council, does that not sound like the greater betrayal? It does to me."

Garla blanched ever so slightly but managed to recover quickly. *"You have nothing. You think you can extort me? A sentinel? You've already lost."*

Tazla checked her instruments. "Yorlo's ship will reach us in less than two minutes. You must have already guessed that our entire presence here was orchestrated by him. Because he was desperate for Lif to expose you and learn what you have been up to. No matter what you claim we did, do you really think he won't hear our story first? Are you going to take the chance that he may listen to what we have to say and take it back to your government, endangering all

those plans you have worked so hard for over the last months, maybe even years?"

Garla leaned closer until her holographic head loomed before them larger than life. *"You are playing a very dangerous game."*

"I know what you're thinking," Tazla said who, of course, was not at all unfamiliar with these types of games in her previous career. Or threats for that matter. "But then I guess you'll need to have one hell of a good explanation of why you just blew up a Krellonian shuttle along with a planetary chief administrator and two dozen Federation citizens. Admittedly, I am not as familiar with Krellonian ways, but where I come from, such a thing would be career suicide at best, and lead to all-out interstellar war at worst."

The sentinel continued to glare at her. Then she focused her entire ire on Culsten who visibly gulped at those eyes burning themselves into his head. Then her face disappeared entirely.

"That was a hell of a bluff," Lif said. "I don't have any kind of evidence to support what you said."

Tazla shrugged. "That's why it's called a bluff."

"What happens if this doesn't work?" Chella asked.

She turned to the other woman. "Then, frankly, we are screwed." She took on a more somber tone before she continued. "But regardless of what happens, I want you to know that we are deeply in your debt. We would not have gotten this far without your help and I can only imagine what kind of repercussions you will have to face for helping us the way you did."

Chella smiled. "You're mistaken. I am the one indebted to you. You saved my daughter and my planet. I don't know why you came here, or even if you had an ulterior motive as Garla claims, but after spending time with your people over the last few days, I'm convinced that you had nothing to do with the plague. And I'm not concerned with my career. It is enough knowing that I will see my daughter again."

Tazla would have lied to herself if she had claimed that she wasn't touched by that sentiment. Sometimes it was easy to forget how satisfying it could be to make new friends, especially across other cultures and civilizations. It was the reason she had joined Starfleet, even if that priority had gotten lost somewhere down the road of her long and oftentimes crooked career path.

As it turned out, Garla was indeed out of moves. She did nothing, didn't even move a single one of her ships until Yorlo arrived. As far as Tazla could tell she didn't even attempt to make contact with him and so it was left to her and Lif to brief him on what had transpired, leaving out the parts where they had wrecked an Eye building and caused damage and injury to Krellonian equipment and personnel, instead falling back once again on the convenient excuse of cultural misunderstandings.

They also left out any of the points Tazla had threatened Garla with, mindful that the resourceful sentinel was likely listening in to the conversation, and while Yorlo wasn't exactly pleased with the lackluster report Lif had provided him, Chella did remind him that the Starfleet team had been single-handedly responsible for curing the Piquis Plague.

Yorlo had wanted to hear Garla's side of the story but the sentinel outright refused to answer any hails after she had spoken to Tazla, her ships simply hovering out there in space, silently watching the situation unfolding, perhaps too proud to depart outright.

Seeing no other avenue to pursue, Yorlo ordered the border patrol to allow *Eagle* to once again enter Krellonian space to retrieve her people and shuttles, after which it quickly departed Star Alliance territory to head back toward the Federation.

As far as Tazla was concerned, that had been the end of their eventful Krellonian mission and their involvement with their affairs. It wouldn't be until much later that she came to realize that any such notion had been not only premature but wishful thinking at best.

## Part Seven: The Rabbit Hole

### 1

*Eagle* was making good progress back toward Federation space, once again linked up with the warp sled that allowed the ship to travel at extreme warp speeds, which her own engine core would not be able to produce on its own.

The away team was back on board after their harrowing escape from Piquis, along with all the shuttles and the runabout *Eagle* had left behind. Most of the equipment they had brought along, however, had been lost when the away team had been forced to evacuate the planet in a hurry. The vast majority of it had been destroyed when Louise Hopkins had rigged the facility to self-destruct, thereby also ensuring that very little Federation technology would find its way into Krellonian hands.

Michael had given the entire away team a couple of days off from their duties to recover from their latest mission. Predictably, however, Tazla Star had not taken him up on the offer and after just a quick sonic shower – the only thing she had admitted she couldn't go without for one more day – and a change of uniform, she was back at his side as they both made their way through *Eagle's* corridors and toward the bridge.

“What kind of diplomatic fallout do you expect from your actions on Piquis?” he asked her after he had read her report, which she had managed to produce in just a couple of hours after having returned to the ship.

“Minimal,” she said quickly. “Chella, Piquis' local administrator, had nothing but praise for us and the way we have dealt with their medical crisis. Councilor Yorlo, even though he did not achieve his overarching mission of gaining valuable intelligence he could use against Garla, was clearly relieved that the quarantine could be lifted and that there was no further risk of the disease spreading to other worlds within the Star Alliance. I like to believe that, overall, we made a very positive impression on the Krellonians.”

“Except perhaps on Sentinel Garla.”

“Let’s just say she won’t have us over for dinner any time soon.”

Michael frowned. “According to your report, she was dead set on capturing our people and Lieutenant Culsten in particular.”

But Star shook her head. “From everything I’ve learned and seen, she may have significant latitude operating within their borders, but very little beyond. In fact, the threat that it may become known that she has worked with a foreign power was enough to make her abandon her plans to take us prisoner.”

They both entered the turbolift and Michael asked for the bridge. Now that they had some privacy, he was more comfortable broaching the *mugato* in the room. “I need to know everything you can tell me about the Omega Molecule.”

“There isn’t much,” she said. “It’s clear that they were synthesizing it at one, possibly more locations within the Piquis system. Some sort of accident at one of their facilities and the resulting exposure to boronite caused the Piquis Plague.”

“Still, surprisingly lucky considering that the last known Omega-related accident caused an entire sector of space to become impassable. What else?”

“According to Lif, Garla produced the molecules for a foreign power and had it transported to a location somewhere within the Amargosa Diaspora,” she continued.

“To what end?”

She shook her head. “Unclear. The only thing we know for sure is that this deal has enabled Garla to bring about her own ambitious and highly questionable sociological experiments. There is also no indication what Garla’s partners are planning to do with Omega.”

Michael found it difficult to keep that frown off his face. “I don’t even know if I want to know more. As far as I’m concerned, this entire thing is now my father’s problem. They decided to keep this from me, let them figure out how to solve it.”

Tazla looked puzzled. “Your father?”

“A long story, Commander.”

The doors to the lift swished open and they both stepped out onto the bridge.

So Dan Leva, who was presently in command, quickly turned to the approaching senior officers. "Sir, I was just about to call you. We've received an urgent message from the *Agamemnon*."

"I'm sure we have."

Leva didn't let his captain's obvious annoyance distract him. "She is on an intercept course at high warp. At our current speed, we will rendezvous in less than one hour," he said and then left the command area of the bridge to return to his usual post at the tactical station.

Michael and Star sat down in their respective chairs.

When he hadn't given any further orders, Star leaned into him slightly. "Are we going to respond?" she asked quietly.

"Honestly, I'd rather not." But before she could inquire any further, he tugged on his uniform jacket. "Mister Leva, put them through please."

"Aye, sir."

The large, forward viewscreen shifted to show exactly the three people he had expected to find. Maya, Jarik, and his father who had apparently now given up all pretenses to continue with the charade of his death, eliciting a few surprised gasps on *Eagle's* bridge.

His father was the first one to speak. "*We need to talk.*"

"Funny, I seem to remember that we spoke just a few hours ago. And I didn't much care for what you had to say then. What makes you think things will be different now?"

"*Stop being so childish, son. Grave matters are afoot that require all our immediate and total attention.*"

He nodded. "So I understand. But as far as I'm concerned, my role in these grave matters of yours has concluded. We've dealt with the crisis on Piquis, my people escaped barely alive, and now, I fully expect to return to the mission I had been promised before all this started," he said and then began to enter commands into the armrest console of his chair to establish a secure uplink to the other ship. "I'm more than happy to send you all the data and reports that have been filed on our mission, which will mean you will know precisely as much as I do," he said and then briefly glanced at the screen again. "Although I still doubt that very much. Do with the information as you wish."

Owens Senior unsurprisingly was not pleased with this. *"Don't make me have to give you an order, son."*

Michael stood. "Dead men can't give orders."

The bridge fell silent while Michael and his father stared at each other across the void of space, for a moment at least it seemed the world around them was all but forgotten. He had lost count of how many times they had been in situations just like this one, father and son, locking horns, neither one of them willing to give an inch.

He was fully aware that this was hardly the time or place for another family argument but he also couldn't deny how angry he was with him. Of all the things he had ever pulled, pretending that he had died, and then using that same ruse to put him and his crew into harm's way without so much as a whisper of what they were really up against, it had to rank near the top.

Nobody else, on either ship, seemed willing to try and mediate this conflict and for an awkwardly long time, Michael could hear nothing but the gentle operating sounds of his bridge and the mild humming of the warp-sled powered engines while his eyes remained focused on his father like ice-cold daggers.

It felt like an eternity even if it probably lasted for much less than a minute and until he decided that he needed to be the bigger man. "We'll rendezvous with *Agamemnon* in..." he turned back to glance at his armrest again. "Forty-six minutes. I will provide you with a full briefing in person after which I fully expect this ship to return to its previous assignment. *Eagle* out."

And with that, his father and his coconspirators disappeared from the view screen.

Star stood from her chair and joined him by his side. "I have a feeling I shouldn't even ask."

He shot her a dark look he quickly tempered, remembering to channel his anger toward the people who deserved it most. "I need you to tell me everything you learned on *Piquis* no matter how inconsequential you think it was. I want to resolve this entire mess as quickly as possible before we get as far away from this place as this warp-sled can take us."

She nodded. "I can do that."

"Mister Leva, you have the bridge," he said and then strode for his ready room with Star following closely.

## 2

It wasn't long after Jonathan Owens had gotten in touch with *Eagle* that Michael found himself once more in a room with his previously deceased father, along with Jarik and Amaya Donners. He had decided to bring Tazla Star along, even though, or perhaps despite the fact that Jon Owens had asked to meet with him alone.

The truth was that he had started to become frustrated with having to go up against the three of them by himself and routinely be made to feel that he was the odd person out when facing what he had started to think of as a cabal of coconspirators. Star didn't exactly level the playing field, but he needed somebody who would see things from his perspective or at least one that differed from that of the cabal. He needed somebody in his corner for change.

His father had originally wished to meet on *Agamemnon*, presumably to ensure he could face his son in friendly territory, but Michael had argued that if he needed a face-to-face, it had to be on his terms or not at all. The man had reluctantly agreed.

"I believe I was quite clear regarding the highly sensitive nature of this meeting," Jon Owens said when he noticed *Eagle's* first officer in the observation lounge along with his son.

Michael regarded him with a glare, communicating in what he hoped were no uncertain terms that he did not appreciate how his father had decided to start things. This meeting had not been his idea, and if his father wanted his help, the last thing he expected him to do was to begin matters by antagonizing him.

"Commander Star has been fully read into the mission details. She knows what I know. Besides, not only has she been previously briefed on Omega due to her former position as a starship captain, she is also the only person in this room who can positively attest to its presence in the Piquis System. She's vital to... whatever the hell this is really all about."

And that, he decided, was all he was going to say about the subject. The implication was clear enough: 'Deal with it or find your way back to the transporter room and get off my ship.'

This hadn't been the first time he had found himself in the position to justify his first officer, but then, of course, considering her past and her short, but disgraced tenure as a starship captain, it was hardly surprising that she had more enemies than friends within the fleet. He already knew that Maya wasn't her biggest fan. He could only guess how Jarik or his father felt about her. At the end of the day, he didn't much care. Or rather, if it was a problem for them, he was fine with it. He quite liked the idea of being the one making life difficult for them, instead of vice versa.

His father and the rest of the cabal wisely decided not to question the matter further as they took their chairs opposite him and Star.

"Firstly, I believe you deserve an apology, son."

That caught him slightly off-guard. It wasn't every day his father sounded remorseful. He could probably count on one hand the times he had asked for forgiveness over the last few years, even if there had been many occasions when it had been appropriate.

"What we did to you – what I did to you – it wasn't right and you certainly didn't deserve it," he said. "Things would have been different if you had accepted my offer back on Earth but the way things turned out, we had to move fast for reasons I don't wish to get into right now."

Michael let his eyes wander over to where Maya was sitting. "Did you know?"

She shook her head. "Not at first, no."

"*Eagle* was never to be part of this mission, you have to believe that," he said. "Yes, I could have used your help when I asked for it and things would have gone very differently, but these latest developments were unexpected and much more pressing than we had anticipated. I had no intention of involving you or your ship at this stage. That decision was made for us."

"By a Krellonian government official who so happened to be my helmsman's uncle," he said and his father nodded. "So what're you saying? That if the Krellonians hadn't requested *Eagle* specifically, I would never have found out that you were still alive?"

He quickly shook his head. "I would have told you eventually." Michael wasn't so sure about this.

"I think we need to focus on the issue at hand, instead of rehashing what has already happened, no matter how unfortunate those decisions may have been," said Jarik and immediately received a rather displeased look from his father in response.

Then he nodded slowly and focused on Michael again. "He's right. The invasion is real. We know this to be the case because you have uncovered the connection between the Krellonians and the subspace aliens. The Omega molecule is the fuel they require to power the subspace gate that will allow them to enter normal space."

"I think if there is one thing your expert torturer has made abundantly clear is that these creatures cannot exist in normal space," Michael said, shooting Jarik an accusatory glance. "Why would they be interested in invading our realm at all?"

The half-Vulcan was about to respond, clearly not appreciating the label being bestowed upon him but Owens Senior raised his hand and cut him off. "These people are able to construct a subspace gateway using technology centuries ahead of our own. It stands to reason that they have found a way to overcome that particular hurdle. The creature you were able to take prisoner was clearly not prepared to enter our realm the way it did."

Michael didn't miss the look that Maya was giving him. She had made it clear that she was fully aware of how he had managed to set free that same alien he had previously adducted. Judging how neither his father nor Jarik had mentioned this point yet led him to believe that she had not shared this information with them. He wasn't quite sure yet what this meant.

"I'm sorry, I know I'm a little late to this party and perhaps I missed something," Star said. "But are you suggesting that certain Krellonian elements are working together with these aliens to allow them to invade our space?"

"Why not?" said Jarik. "We have seen those kinds of alliances play out before. Members of a frustrated Cardassian military took it upon themselves to ally themselves with the Dominion. And we all know how that ended."

"It's also entirely possible that the Krellonians don't know what the subspace aliens' endgame is," said Maya.

Michael wanted to counter that he wasn't yet entirely sure that *they* knew what the endgame was. "So let's go back to the question I posed when all this began. Why not go to Starfleet Command with all this? You seem convinced that you have enough evidence to prove this theory."

But Jarik shook his head. "It would be pointless."

Jon Owens responded to Michael's puzzled expression. "We've already attempted proper channels. Ever since the end of the Dominion War, there has been a decided lack of interest within the upper echelons of Starfleet to take preemptive action. And even if they did, Starfleet would not be able to mobilize out here quickly enough. Which means, for now, we're all that we've got."

Michael leaned back in his chair, uttering a little sigh and trying to let all this information sink in. He had come into this meeting determined to untangle himself from this mess that as far as he was concerned had been entirely one of his father's making. He couldn't quite ignore the little voice in the back of his head that concerned itself with what could happen if his father was right after all.

He considered all three of them. "Let's say that we're facing an impending invasion from subspace. What's our next play? Our only lead is a rogue Krellonian spymaster and we pretty much burned that bridge to the ground."

"We might have another one," said Jarik and pushed a padd across the table and toward him.

Michael picked it up and reviewed the content. It held little more than what looked like spatial coordinates. "What's this?"

"It's what we've learned from our interrogation of the alien prisoner," Jarik said.

Michael frowned and passed the padd on to his first officer to have a look at. "Under torture."

Jarik was once again cut off by his father. Something that seemed to momentarily frustrate the half-Vulcan. "It's the best lead we have, given the circumstances."

"This isn't even a full set of coordinates," Star said after she had looked over the padd. "This could encompass hundreds of parsecs and take us months to search."

"Twenty-five thousand six hundred AU," said Maya. "It would take eighteen weeks for both our ships to cover that area."

Michael offered her and the others a baffled look. "You want us to go out there and search for this portal for the next two years?"

"We're not searching for a portal, son. We are searching for the Omega molecule. And that stands out like a beacon in a clear night sky."

"A very large sky," said Michael.

"There might be another way."

All eyes turned toward Star.

"Lif Culsten. He was onboard one of Garla's freighters, ostensibly transporting the molecule. He must have known where it was heading," she said.

Owens Senior visibly perked up at hearing this news. "We need to find out. Can you bring him in?"

Michael was tempted to turn him down but he couldn't think of a good reason. "Owens to Lieutenant Culsten, please report to the observation room."

It didn't take him long to respond. "*On my way, sir.*"

"It goes without saying that the details of this mission remain highly classified and therefore are not to be discussed in his presence," Jarik said, causing Michael to roll his eyes with some annoyance.

Culsten had apparently been on the bridge on the deck above since he arrived within just a couple of minutes. The young man was momentarily taken back after seeing what he had walked in on, and the collection of senior officers assembled around the table, all of whom regarded him carefully from the moment he had stepped into the room.

Star quickly offered him a reassuring smile. "Relax, Lieutenant. There is nothing wrong. But we do need you to attempt to recall certain information you may have learned while you were working with Garla."

He nodded. "I'll do my best, sir."

"You mentioned in your report that after you had boarded Garla's freighter, you helped her plot a course for it toward the Amargosa Diaspora. We need to know the exact course."

"The heading was two-four-eight mark one-seven-eight."

Michael and the others aimed baffled looks at the man.

He allowed himself a little smirk. "I'm a pilot. If there is one thing I remember, it's a course heading."

Michael offered him a smile. "Well done, Lieutenant. Thank you. I think that'll be all for now."

Culsten bopped his head slightly and then quickly retreated again, clearly thankful to be excused.

Star spoke as soon as he had left and after she had entered the new data into the padd. "They are not spatial coordinates so we still can't pinpoint a location but if we combine that heading with the approximate location of the freighter before it left the Piquis system and then apply the coordinates we already have to the equation we can at least narrow down the search area quite a bit," she said and then held up the padd with her calculations. "This should cut down the area we need to search to something we can cover in days."

Michael beamed proudly, happy that Star had not only just demonstrated her value but also the opportunity of throwing it all back into his father's face. Pettiness wasn't usually his style but then again, it wasn't every day his father came back to life after faking his own death either.

Jon Owens didn't quite take the bait. "Good work. I suggest we set out immediately. Son, I would like to stay on *Eagle* while we carry out our search."

That sense of triumph he had been feeling quickly dissipated.

His father could obviously tell. "Don't worry, I understand that you're the captain. I have no intention of overruling any of your decisions while I'm on board. Not that I'd be able to. You were quite right earlier. As far as Starfleet is concerned, I'm still dead."

His disarming attitude made it difficult to turn down the request and he began to nod.

"I'll stay here as well," Jarik said before Michael could even agree to his father. "Unless of course, you have any objections, Captain."

He shook his head. "No, objections, as long as we all agree that there is only room for one in the center seat," he said. In truth, he found this sudden interest by both men to remain close by his side more than a little unnerving. He shot a glance at his fellow starship captain but if she had any issues with this, or even felt slighted, she didn't let it on.

"We can coordinate search patterns as soon as I'm back on *Agamemnon*," she said as she stood.

Michael nodded and he and the others followed suit. An ensign who had escorted their three guests to the observations lounge was left to deal with arranging temporary guest quarters for his father and Jarik and escort Amaya back to the transporter room, leaving just Michael and Star in the observation room.

"I'm just going to come right out and say it. This entire meeting gave me a really bad vibe."

"Good. I was worried I was the only one," Michael said.

"What do we do?"

He uttered a resigned little sigh. "The only thing we can do, Commander. We keep a close eye on everything. And we hope to God that it's going to be enough."

### 3

It had been two days since *Eagle* had first set out into the expansive Amargosa Diaspora on a hunt for the Omega molecule which, as the theory went, would point them toward the location of the subspace portal an extra-dimensional race had constructed to invade regular space, and for two days now, they had come up empty.

Michael, tiring of sitting on the bridge and staring out into the vacuum of space, had finally retreated to his quarters once it had become increasingly obvious that they would go through another uneventful night shift.

Sleep, however, hadn't come. His thoughts had kept him restless and wide awake. Although he had felt quite relieved that his father – as well as Jarik – who had taken up residence on his ship, had so far managed to keep mostly to themselves, he feared that it was only going to be a matter of time until old patterns would repeat themselves, usually culminating into loud and inevitable arguments about one thing or the other.

His thoughts also drifted toward Amaya. While *Agamemnon* was currently engaged in executing her own search pattern that kept her at a distance from *Eagle*, they were certainly close enough to

allow for real-time communication, and yet she had kept silent so far. It was becoming clearer to him with every passing day that she had been quite determined when she had suggested that they placed their budding relationship on hold. She had certainly not given him any signs over the last week that she was considering him as anything other than a colleague. Worse even, an obstacle in her way to carry out her own mission to support his father's agenda.

Lying on his bed, still fully dressed in his uniform, he tried for the umpteenth time to distract himself by reviewing routine ship reports contained on a data padd. There was the case of Crewman Swearinger continuously reporting late to his shifts, the daily fuel, and energy consumption reports, the small power drain in the secondary EPS relay in cargo bay four, and a dozen other, equally mundane reports by various department heads and section leads across the ship, none of which managing to capture his attention for longer than a few seconds.

He was grateful when Xylion's call came through.

*"Your presence is required on the bridge, sir."*

Michael was already on his feet before the science officer had completed his sentence. "On my way. Owens out."

The sight that greeted him on the bridge was not what he had expected. He had been half prepared to walk into a room plastered with the ominous Omega symbol on every visible display, or perhaps his father and Jarik having finally decided to take a more active role in this mission, shouting orders at his crew.

Instead, the atmosphere was as low-key as was to be expected from the middle of the night shift with most stations being manned by relief officers and Commander Xylion in command. What he certainly hadn't expected was to find Bensu standing by the Vulcan's side, awaiting the arrival of the captain.

Michael's first instinct was to query why a civilian had been granted access to an area usually restricted to anyone but authorized Starfleet personnel, but since this was hardly his first visit and Bensu had proven on multiple occasions to be much more than he had appeared, he decided to overlook the breach of protocol. "What's going on?"

Xylion glanced at Bensu briefly before considering the captain. "Bensu believes that he may be able to assist us in locating the

subspace gateway.”

Xylion like the rest of the senior crew had been briefed on their search for the subspace portal. Although the cabal – his father, Jarik and Amaya – had wanted to keep this information restricted, after *Eagle* had already made contact with a subspace rupture previously, sent an away team inside, and returned with an alien prisoner, it had become increasingly difficult to hide the true purpose of their mission to the Diaspora. Of course, any reference to the Omega molecule had so far been kept quiet in line with the corresponding directive that Starfleet took nearly as seriously as General Order One.

Michael had little doubt that Bensusan knew more than he had learned from Xylion or other members of the crew. How this was possible remained one of those unexplained mysteries he hoped to get to the bottom of before all this was over. For now, he was not inclined to dismiss any help in finding what they had been looking for. “How?”

“I suppose it won’t surprise you to hear, Captain, if I were to say that I cannot explain it. Like I haven’t been able to explain much of anything lately,” he said and then carried on before Michael could question him on this further. “Rest assured, it is as frustrating to me as it must be to you. Likely much more so.”

He was willing to accept this. For now. “All right, so how exactly can you help us find the portal? Do you know the coordinates?”

He shook his head. “It’s not as simple as that, I’m afraid.”

“Of course, it’s not.”

“It’s more of a – for a lack of a better term – a sensation. I feel something nearby. Similar to what we have encountered previously but on a much, much larger scale.”

Michael turned to look at Xylion who seemed to know what his captain was asking for. “I cannot offer a scientific explanation, sir. However, it is not without precedence that certain beings are able to sense anomalies and disruptions within the space-time continuum.”

He nodded, acknowledging that fact, and then faced the main view screen that continued to display the globular cluster of the Amargosa Diaspora with its countless bright stars and its blue and red nebulae hanging beyond it all like a galactic veil. He could tell

that Xylion had already brought *Eagle* to a stop after Benu's premonition, or whatever it was.

The doors to the near turbolift parted to allow Tazla Star to step onto the bridge. She was followed closely by Jon Owens and Jarik. Star shot him a quick, telling look, letting him know that it likely hadn't been the most pleasant turbolift ride of her life.

He had summoned Star onto the bridge after Xylion had called for him, he had no idea how the other two had found out.

"What is happening?" Jarik said. "Why have we stopped? Have we found something?"

He sounded a tad too demanding for his liking as if he was barking out orders and Michael didn't immediately respond. "Maybe. We're not sure yet."

His father looked confused. "What is it?"

"Mister Bensu here has a feeling," Michael said. He had meant to be entirely sincere about it, but it had sounded funny even in his head.

Star was clearly not entirely read-in yet as to the latest revelations regarding the man who until not too long ago had been considered a somewhat enigmatic but otherwise harmless and likable bartender and who had now been elevated to a position important enough that his presence on the bridge was greeted with little concern. "I guess I missed more than I thought."

"Sufficient to say that, Mister Bensu here has proven to be a surprise to all of us," Michael said, not willing to go into the specific details now.

It was enough for Star who simply nodded and accepted the news.

"Can he tell us where it is?" Owens Senior said.

Michael turned his own quizzical expression toward the bartender instead.

Bensu took a few steps in the direction of the main screen until he stood right in front of the ceiling-high, holographic display that currently showed nothing but space and stars. The others simply watched him as he seemed to concentrate on the void.

Then he turned back. "No."

Michael forced himself not to let his mouth gape open but some of the others were not as restrained.

Jarik was the first to say what everyone else was thinking. "Then what is the point of all this? Let's go back to our search pattern and stop wasting time."

"What I mean to say," Bensu started, "is that I cannot just point the way and tell you to search there. I know it's close. Very close. I can sense that much. But I can't tell you which way you need to go."

"Let's stop focusing then on what you cannot do," Michael said. "What is it you can do to help us find what we're looking for?"

Bensu thought for a moment and then turned his head to look to his side, right toward the helm station, currently occupied by Ensign Rachel Milestone. The young gamma shift flight operator had her large eyes glued on the bartender like most everyone else on the bridge. She also looked just as confused as the rest as he glanced her way. "I might be able to take you there."

"Wait a minute," said Jarik. "We are not just going to let you pilot a Starfleet vessel. You are a civilian after all."

Michael ignored him and took a step closer to Bensu. "Have you ever helmed a starship before? Do you know how to do it?"

"The answer to your first question is no, Captain. Or if I ever did, I cannot recall it. However, Xylion is quite familiar with how to operate the helm controls which means so am I."

"What does that mean?" Jarik asked his confusion still quite evident.

Michael had not shared with him or his father the exact nature of Bensu yet. Or at least as much as he had learned so far. The answer seemed to satisfy him, however. The man had shared a consciousness with Xylion for decades. It stood to reason that a great deal of knowledge would have rubbed off during that time. He considered his first officer for a moment.

She nodded. "It's probably not the craziest thing we've done in a while," she said with a little smirk, apparently not terribly concerned with handing over the reins of a three-million-ton starship to a civilian bartender with apparently no formal flight training whatsoever. Michael wondered if she didn't secretly enjoy the idea a little bit. It would have fit right in with her more unorthodox ways of doing things.

Jarik was not sharing that view. "You cannot be serious."

He considered him next. "I think it's about time we try something new here. Unless you would prefer for us to spend a few more weeks randomly running around the sector on the off-chance we stumble across something noteworthy."

Jarik was clearly not convinced but kept further objections to himself, perhaps because Admiral Owens didn't offer any himself, choosing instead to remain quiet and leaving his son to run his ship as he saw fit. Michael was tempted to offer him a grateful look in response but then changed his mind. His father was the reason for all this in the first place, he had decided. He regarded Milestone instead. "Ensign, please hand the helm over to Mister Bensus."

"Uh, yes, sir," she said, sounding rather puzzled by this development. No doubt she had never, in her wildest dreams, expected to be given such an order. She pushed the conn panel away from her seat to allow her to stand and then left the chair, offering Bensus a baffled look.

Bensus for his part took the surrendered seat hesitantly, very slowly bringing the console back toward him until he could study it closely. "Rachel," he said after a moment, clearly being on a first-name basis with the young officer who he likely tended to in the Nest on regular occasions. He looked up at her. "Stay close, if you don't mind."

Milestone nodded and positioned herself at his side while he continued to study the console. She leaned in slightly to point out various sections on the panel. "This is attitude control over here. Thrusters are over there and this is —"

"Impulse control and navigational sensors," he said nodding. "Yes, I think I understand. Thank you."

Michael stepped up next to Xylion. "How certain are you that he can in fact pilot the ship, Commander?"

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "He has witnessed me piloting various crafts in the past. Theoretically, he should possess all knowledge required to safely operate flight control."

"Big difference between theory and practice though," said Star but kept her comment quiet enough so as not to disturb Bensus's concentration. "Hey, at least it's not as if there are any stars nearby we could accidentally fly into."

"I assure you, Commander," Bensu said, showing that he had heard her comments even while he kept his eyes on the console, "I am not planning to take us that far. What we are looking for is much closer than that." He began to gently tap several panels as if to see how they reacted to his touch. His confidence quickly grew.

"Changing heading to four-two mark one-one-eight," Milestone said as she watched Bensu's efforts.

Star stepped behind Lieutenant Stanmore who was sitting at the operations post opposite Bensu and who like most of the rest of the bridge crew watched the bartender behind the helm with rapt attention. "Lieutenant, I want all available sensors at maximum. Keep an eye out for anything out of place. If you see a single suspicious particle of space dust I want to know about it."

He nodded. "Yes, sir. So far, I can't see anything at all out of the ordinary," he said before shooting a fleeting glance to his right. "Unless you count a bartender steering a starship," he added sotto voce.

"I promise I'll let you all mix your own drinks for a week after this," Bensu said as he made another adjustment.

"Increasing speed to one-quarter impulse," Milestone said.

Jarik took a few steps toward the conn. "How long exactly is this going to take?"

Bensu kept his eyes on the controls. "Hard to say. It could be a few minutes, it could be hours. I know we are close but I can't say if — oh," he interrupted himself and added a few quick commands.

"All engines stopped," said Milestone.

Bensu looked up at her. "That's a curious thing you do," he said. "Calling everything out like that."

The young woman looked dumbfounded. "Uh ... it's just something we do," she said and then shot the captain an unsure look.

Michael nodded at her. Bensu was not a trained pilot and he appreciated somebody telling him what he was up to.

Bensu turned around in his chair. "We need to raise shields and configure them to a frequency of sixteen point two kilo-electron volts."

Before Michael could ask another question Jarik jumped in. "Do it," he said simply and Michael could tell that the frequency seemed to mean something to him.

He glanced at tactical where he found Lieutenant Alendra on duty. "Raise shields and adjust the frequency as requested. Go to yellow alert and advise the *Agamemnon* of our position."

The bridge lighting dimmed slightly and some of the panels lit up in amber to reflect the ship's raised alert level.

"Shields up and reconfigured," the Bolian woman confirmed from the tactical station. "Message to *Agamemnon* has been sent."

Bensu turned back to the conn and continued to enter commands.

"Thrusters ahead," Milestone said. "Three hundred kph and accelerating."

"I'm detecting something directly ahead," said Stanmore with sudden urgency. "We are passing through some kind of barrier. It came out of nowhere."

Even as he spoke the view screen made the transition unmistakable. Where there had been a busy starscape just a moment before, now all that could be seen was a swarming mass of a pale pinkish color, almost salmon, interspersed with streaks of white. The Amargosa Diaspora was gone. The transition was marked by trembling deck plates that were not severe enough to cause any major disturbance.

"Damage report," Michael said.

"Shields down to ninety-seven percent," Alendra said. "No damage."

"Where are we?" said Star as she stepped closer to the screen to take in those unfamiliar surroundings. "And what is that thing?"

All eyes were now focused on the object that had become visible within the swirling mass. It was clearly artificial in nature, dark and ominous, it didn't quite seem to belong. It was also massive in size. So large in fact that the viewscreen seemed to be able to capture only a very small portion of it.

"That," Admiral Owens said, his voice sounding reverend now, "is what we have been looking for."

It was by far the largest stellar scale megastructure Michael had ever laid eyes upon, and as far as he knew, quite possibly the largest one anyone had ever come across. In fact, he had some difficulties getting his mind to come to grips with the sheer size of this thing they had encountered. Even Xylion, with his precise and calculated Vulcan mind had so far only been able to offer an educated guess on its exact dimensions while *Eagle's* computer still worked on the calculations, clearly encountering some difficulties in this unfamiliar environment.

It was at least five hundred million kilometers in diameter, more than twice the size of the largest space structure previously encountered by Starfleet – a Dyson sphere of unknown origin – and with a diameter far exceeding that of an average giant star.

Answers to most of their questions still eluded them but a few things were clear. The structure was ring-shaped, composed of solanogen, neutronium, and elements of unknown materials, sensors were not able to penetrate the hull, if the shiny dark surface was, in fact, a hull, and a consensus had been quickly reached that no known race would have had the technological capacity to build such a structure, certainly not the Krellonians.

Michael and half of the bridge crew, including Star and Bensus, had assembled around the two aft science stations where Xylion was now working on trying to provide some, if not, any answers to this mystery, assisted by Deen and Hopkins who had since joined the bridge.

“With sensors remaining unable to penetrate any sections of the object in our vicinity, we have no means to determine its purpose,” Xylion said as he worked on the science station, seemingly consulting multiple displays and read-outs all at once.

“It doesn’t help that sensors aren’t very reliable here. Wherever here is,” said Deen, sitting at the Vulcan’s side. “I’m getting a great deal of confusing and contradictory readings for anything beyond one thousand kilometers.”

“We could try and use probes,” said Hopkins who had taken a seat at Deen’s right. The engineer wasn’t able to keep the excitement over this discovery out of her voice. “We could deploy them all along the object at regular intervals that may give us more definitive readings on its composition and maybe its function. We won’t have

enough to cover the entire thing but we could start replicating more," she said and then turned around to consider her audience.

"We need to find a way to get into the portal?" Jarik said.

"What makes you think it even has an interior?"

But Jarik didn't seem to notice the suspicious look in Michael's eyes as he kept his focus on the information being displayed on the consoles in front of him. "It has."

Michael glanced at his father who offered little in response to this before his eyes once again focused on the man who had been his apparent successor. "I am starting to get the distinct impression that you know much more about this portal – if that's even what this is – than you are letting on. And I'm inclined to stop any further actions here until I learn what it is you know."

Jarik met his stare defiantly but said nothing.

"When we approached this area and Bensu suggested a change to our shield frequency you were surprisingly quick to agree with it. I wonder why that is, considering that you've been nothing but skeptical about his assistance up to that point," Michael continued.

"It is fortunate that Bensu did suggest the adjustment," said Xylian. "This entire area is flooded with high-frequency subspace distortions. Had we attempted to enter this space without the adjustment, *Eagle* may have taken catastrophic damage."

"And you knew this," Michael said, shooting Jarik an accusatory stare.

He quickly shook his head. "I did not. Sixteen point two kilo-electron volts was the exact same frequency the crew of the *Enterprise* used when encountering the subspace aliens for the first time. I simply recognized the frequency."

Deen nodded as she checked the records. "He's right about that."

"I'm still not satisfied that you've told us everything you know about what we are up against here," Michael said and then included his father in his condemning glare.

"I've shared everything I know," said Jon Owens. "If there is one person here who clearly knows much more than he's letting on, I would think it is obvious who that is." He glanced over to Bensu who was standing slightly apart from the others. "You couldn't have

known about the shield frequency the *Enterprise* discovered and yet you did.”

“I already told you —”

“You don’t know how you know,” Jarik said, finishing the sentence for the enigmatic man who until recently had been a mere barkeep. “Yes, that’s all very convenient.”

But Michael was not yet willing to suspect Bensu and let his father and Jarik off the hook. After all, as far as he knew, only the latter two had outright lied to him. “Let’s assume for a moment this thing is a subspace portal as your intelligence suggests. What do you know about this area of space? Clearly, we’re not in the Amargosa Diaspora any longer.”

But both men offered nothing more than blank looks in return.

Michael decided to give up and turned back toward his science and engineering team.

“Starfleet has never, to our knowledge, encountered this realm before. I won’t be able to offer a full analysis without further study, but the composition of our surroundings seems consistent with elements we know to exist in subspace,” Xylion said.

“So we are inside subspace?” said Star.

Xylion shook his head slightly. “Not directly. The best hypothesis I can offer at this time is that we are currently occupying a transitional space between our own space and the realm we refer to as subspace.”

“In-between space,” said Deen, which Michael didn’t find particularly helpful as he turned back and took a few steps away to look at the viewscreen at the front of the bridge where the ominous, swirling mass of in-between space greeted him, along with just a minuscule section of the massive ring structure that occupied the entire area. As a man who had made a career out of traveling and exploring the stars, their prominent absence, as well as the lack of the familiar black void of space, felt rather disquieting. Not to mention the presence of a giant megastructure of unknown origin or purpose, looming just ahead, dwarfing *Eagle* the way a blue whale would a common ant.

“Commander,” said Star. “I know we’re not able to scan the structure, but do you detect any odd energy readings from the object?”

Michael could see by the way Xylion raised one of his arched eyebrows that he found the question somewhat perplexing. Of course, he knew exactly what she was getting at. "How do you define odd, Commander?"

"Anything out of the ordinary," said Star but must have realized the absurdity of her question even as the words came over her lips.

"Is there anything around here that isn't out of the ordinary?" said Deen.

Star acceded the point and then joined Michael who had moved up to the horseshoe-shaped tactical console and a few steps away from the rest of the group. They considered the viewscreen together. "No sign of the molecule," she said in a subdued voice nobody else would be able to overhear.

"Probably because we can't scan inside that thing."

"If it is inside," she said. "If it is powering a structure of that size, the amount of energy it might be able to produce could be enough to make it capable of just about anything."

Michael nodded slightly but with trepidation. It had been a thought that had crossed his mind as well. And it frightened him.

"Bensu, are you feeling alright?"

DeMara's concerned tone forced Michael to turn back toward the rest of his people and he immediately spotted the only civilian among them in noticeable discomfort. He had closed his eyes and was leaning heavily against one of the aft workstations.

Leva and Deen were tending to him.

"Something is happening," he said.

Michael and Star quickly closed in on him. "Can you try and be more specific?" he said.

Deen pinned him with a disapproving glare, likely not appreciating the way he was prioritizing his mission over a crewmember's well-being but Michael chose to ignore this for now.

Bensu reached for his head, almost as if attempting to stop it from spinning. Then he opened his eyes wide. "Something immensely powerful. I am not sure I can do it justice by explaining it in words. But it is, quite literally, taking my breath away," he said with tears welling up.

Michael and Star exchanged worried looks, Omega on both their minds.

"It is close, Captain," he continued. "Very close."

"The structure," said Star.

He shook his head. "No. Much closer than that."

"Sir, I am detecting an energy spike," said Xylion as he quickly refocused his attention from Bensus to the science station.

Both Michael and Star whipped around, their minds still preoccupied with the terrifying thoughts of the immeasurable powers the structure might be able to unleash. "What's happening?" Michael said.

"Unclear," said Deen. "But it seems to originate from the space at the very center of the ring structure."

"On screen," Michael said and turned to look.

At first, he could see nothing there but more of that pinkish mass that had replaced the dark matter of space but within just a few moments something began to bloom there. A bright, radiating light that had started as a pinpoint but was rapidly growing outward, swallowing up whatever had been there before.

"Analysis?"

"Sensors are unable to determine the nature or the composition of the anomaly, however, I can confirm that it is growing at a rate of approximately five-thousand meters per second," Xylion said.

Before Michael could fire off another order, the deck plates underneath his boots shook so suddenly, that he would have lost his balance if he hadn't grabbed hold of the tactical console nearby.

"Sir, I'm reading a massive gravimetric force we seem to gotten caught in," said Milestone who had since retaken the helm from which she had been temporarily evicted earlier. Her fingers were racing across her console, seemingly trying to regain control.

"Red alert," Star said and then took a moment to help Deen back onto her feet after she had lost her footing.

Michael strode back to the command area of the bridge while Deen returned to the forward-facing ops station to relieve Stanmore. Star joined the captain, taking her chair next to the center seat.

"The gravimetric force is originating from the anomaly," Xylion said but Michael had already deduced that much.

“We are being pulled toward it,” said Deen after she had checked her sensor feeds.

“Engage impulse engines, full reverse. Put some distance between us and that structure,” said Michael.

But Milestone didn’t appear to have much success judging by the way she was shaking her head with frustration. “I cannot produce enough thrust to counter the effects of the anomaly.”

“Can we go to warp?” said Star.

“I would not recommend it,” said Hopkins who had moved over a few stations to man the bridge engineering console. “The hull may not be able to withstand the strain and we could literally rip ourselves apart in the attempt. Not to mention that we don’t yet understand the laws of physics in this area of space. Warp might not even work here.”

“The anomaly is continuing to expand,” said Xylion. “The gravimetric forces are increasing at a proportional rate. At our current acceleration toward the anomaly, I anticipate that we will make contact with it in sixty-four seconds.”

Michael turned to look for his father to implore him once more for answers. He still felt certain that he knew far more than he had shared, possibly even possessed knowledge that could stop them from being dragged into an unknown subspace phenomenon. But he couldn’t see him anywhere and didn’t have the time to look. He regarded the bartender instead who was doing his best to hold on to the port auxiliary console. “Bensu, any ideas?”

“I wish I had, Captain. That power I’ve felt earlier, it’s still here and it is like I’m experiencing a familiar sensation about all this but it’s buried deep inside my mind. Not unlike a distant whisper you hear in the dark. You know it’s there but you cannot make out what it is trying to tell you.” He seemed genuinely frustrated at not being able to offer more than he did.

“Well, try to remember quickly,” he said and looked back at the view screen and that growing mass of pulsing white light threatening to swallow them whole any second now.

“Full power to shields and structural integrity,” said Star. “Pump everything we’ve got left into inertia dampeners. Advise all stations on all decks to brace for impact.”

“Ten seconds to contact,” said Deen.

There was nothing left to say, Michael realized as he clutched the armrests of his chair so tightly that his knuckles were beginning to turn white. There was little that was more frustrating than the helpless feeling of knowing that you were about to be dropped into a big hole without knowing the first thing about what to expect at the bottom of it. He didn't even know if it had a bottom or if *Eagle* could survive the fall. But if they wanted to or not, they were about to find out.

"Contact," Deen said just before she braced herself against her console, as did everyone around her.

The bright light on the bridge almost immediately winked out and darkness engulfed them before Michael's senses were attacked by a vast array of colors so diverse, he was sure he wouldn't have been able to name a fraction of them.

The light show was so intense and all-encompassing that he seemed to lose his grasp on reality. His chair, the deck, the bulkheads, even the people all around him seemed to disappear as he felt himself floating weightlessly through empty space.

The endless attack on the visual spectrum seemed too much for his eyes or his brain to register and soon all he could make out were flashes of light so powerful, he thought they were burning his retinas and shooting fiery lances of pain deep into his skull.

He wanted to scream but he couldn't hear his voice anymore, he couldn't hear anything at all. He couldn't even tell how much time had passed since they had entered what could only be described as pure and total madness. He couldn't be sure if it had been seconds or days.

And the uncertainty just continued to spread like a cancer burrowing itself through his mind at light speed. Had they entered into an unknown realm of space or had it all been a dream, a waking vision of sorts, torturing what little was left of his rational brain? Had there been a structure or had it all just been a figment of his imagination? Was his father alive or dead? Was Amaya Donners a friend or a foe? Had he ever truly taken steps into subspace, coming across an alien race, and had Bensus saved his life, or had he never been there at all?

Visions began to flood his memory. Visions of things he thought he knew and visions of things he thought he could never possibly

have known. It was all blurring together like different shades of ink swirling on a blank page. Nothing seemed certain, everything was suddenly possible. Nothing he had known had ever taken place and yet at the same time, everything had happened all at once.

His brother Matthew had died many years ago but he had also lived. His mother had perished in an accident when he had been a child but she had also raised him until he had left home as an adolescent. His father had been a caring family man, putting his wife and children before anything else in the universe, and he had also abandoned them all to pursue his Starfleet career. Amaya Donners had been his best friend, his lover, his wife, and his greatest enemy. The Dominion had been vanquished in their long war and the Federation Alliance had been utterly destroyed. The Borg had been pushed back again and again in their single-minded attempts to conquer humanity, and they had assimilated all of Earth and the Federation.

He saw a countless number of possibilities flash in front of his eyes, each lasting less than a second and an eternity, all searing itself into his brain only to disappear again before he could grasp their meaning.

And then he felt an anguish the likes of which he had never experienced before. It was the despair of an infinite number of souls that had seen the bright light of existence one moment before they were claimed by the crushing darkness of annihilation the next.

Michael could be sure of only one thing. He was losing his mind.

It wasn't until he felt the coppery taste of blood in his mouth that the first strands of sanity seemed to return like scarce rays of light pushing through thick clouds after a storm.

He felt something hard and unforgiving just underneath him. He opened his eyes hesitantly, fearing what he would find.

Nothing was in focus and the world around him was a blurred and indistinguishable mess. He could make out rough shapes that looked familiar but he found impossible to name.

The sensation in his extremities returned slowly and immediately punished him with excruciating pain he wasn't sure he had ever experienced before. He felt as if he had been fed through a woodchipper and then haphazardly reassembled.

He remained there, splayed out on the deck, for what felt like minutes, unable to move a single muscle.

Sound seemed to return before his vision and his ability to move. After decades of serving on a starship, he was quite familiar with the tones and resonances created by the equipment required to travel the stars and he recognized it instantly, even if he could tell from experience that something wasn't quite right. The ship was hurting.

That revelation seemed to be enough to force him into action and ignoring the pain he felt, he slowly began to push himself off the floor until he was on his hands and knees. He very nearly collapsed again, but when his vision finally cleared, and he was able to make out his bridge, he fought to pull himself up onto his knees. He spat out some blood but when he felt his face, he could sense no external injuries at all.

He tried to speak, his instincts telling him that he needed to know how bad things were, how much damage the ship had taken, and how many people had died, but none of those words managed to come out.

He craned his neck up to look toward the tactical station and he saw Bensus standing there instead of Leva or Alendra. His fingers were working the panels but he stopped when he spotted the captain looking up at him.

"The ship is still in one piece," he said, sounding to Michael as if he was speaking with a dozen voices all at once. "According to internal sensors the crews' life signs are weak and intermittent. Most of our systems seem to be scrambled. I think life support is stable but I can't really tell much more."

Michael wanted to ask where they had ended up but again, couldn't quite get the words to form in his mouth. Bensus seemed to notice his struggles and quickly rounded the station to come to his help. "Take it easy," he said as he helped him to stand up. "Whatever we just went through didn't just scramble our systems. The entire crew has been affected."

He couldn't manage to stand and Bensus helped him to his chair instead. All around him he could see the rest of the crew littering the deck. "See ... to ... others."

Bensu seemed to understand and began to help those who were regaining consciousness back to their chairs, all of whom were dazed and clearly not fully aware of what was happening.

Michael attempted to check on the ship status using the console in his armrest but Bensu had been right in saying that most ship functions were offline. He tried the viewscreen and when he looked up he could see it flickering to life, even though heavily distorted with interference.

He could see stars again but he wasn't entirely sure anymore if they had ever gone away in the first place or if they had always been there.

There was a starship that looked very much like the *Agamemnon*. He seemed to have a faint recollection of giving an order to advise the other ship of their last position. What he couldn't tell was if he had given that order a few hours ago or if it had been days or even weeks.

*Agamemnon* was not alone.

The other ship looked as familiar as the reflection in a mirror.

His console indicated an incoming transmission and he accepted it.

The still flickering viewscreen shifted to show another bridge just like his own. A man stood there and stared back at him. He had seen that man before in his dreams.

*"This is Captain Edison of the Starship Eagle,"* the man said with a crisp English accent, unable to keep anger and suspicion out of his voice.

*"Gene Edison,"* Michael said, his voice distant to his own ears. The name though was as familiar as his face. He knew that man, or had known him once.

*"Yes,"* he said sharply. *"And I want to know who the bloody hell you are and where the blazes you've come from."*

**Quantum Divergence continues in  
*Book II: State of Entanglement***

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#1 - *Prelude to War*

#2 - *Crossing Over*

#3 - *Homecoming*

### **Lower Deck Tales**

#1 - *My Everything*

#2 - *Beyond Acheron*

#3 - *The Longest Day*

#4 - *The Ship of the Dead*

#5 - *Horizon Protocol*

#6 - *Celestial Fire*

### **Short Stories**

- *The Sins Of The Father (aka Paternal Instincts)*

- *The Times They Are A-Changin'*

- and others

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