

6



StarEagleAdventures.com

**WAR IS HELL**

**FOR SOME  
PEACE IS WORSE**

*Semper Fidelis*  
THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES VI

Background image © by CBS Studios, Inc.

*Semper Fidelis*  
THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES VI

**THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES # 6**

BASED UPON 'STAR TREK<sup>®</sup>'

BASED UPON “STAR TREK<sup>®</sup>” CREATED BY  
**Gene Roddenberry**

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

## DISCLAIMER

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental

This story has been written with no commercial intentions.  
“Star Trek<sup>®</sup>” and all related names are the sole property of CBS Studios Inc.  
“Star Trek<sup>®</sup>” is a Registered Trademark of CBS Studios Inc. All Rights Reserved.



The contents of this file may not be altered in any way, be distributed for monetary gain, or be published without the author's expressed permission.

----  
[StarEagleAdventures.com](http://StarEagleAdventures.com)

----  
1<sup>ST</sup> Edition (Rev I) — December 2015

**Stardate: 52921**  
**(December 2375 CE)**

*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace*

*You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one*

John Lennon

*Soldiers, when committed to a task, can't compromise.  
It's unrelenting devotion to the standards of duty and courage,  
absolute loyalty to others, not letting the task go until it's been done.*

John Keegan

## PROLOGUE

### TWO DAYS AFTER THE TREATY OF BAJOR

The attack had started at dawn.

It hadn't been anything Gunnery Sergeant Jonar Arik hadn't seen before. They had used artillery fire to soften them up and weaken their air defenses before they brought in the hive swarms which unleashed their firepower with pinpoint accuracy, decimating half the base within a few minutes.

It was ironic, Arik had thought when the bombardment had commenced. After all only a day earlier this base had belonged to the very same people who were now trying to turn it into dust. It wasn't entirely unexpected and actually made a certain kind of sense. If the enemy couldn't have it, they would make damn sure Arik and his men wouldn't keep it either. And if the sixty or so Marines which occupied this base now would lose their lives defending it, then so much the better for the enemy.

Arik was determined not to let it come to that.

He rushed into the main command and control room, dodging light fittings and pieces of the ceiling coming crashing down onto the floor.

He found the room much like the rest of the base. Dark and brown colors dominated the interior design and symmetry seemingly everywhere, the door frames, the support struts, even the bolts holding the place barely together. The designers had heavily favored trapezoids instead of squares and ovals in favor of circles. Arik had only spent a little amount of time here but he was already tiring of the design. Not that he expected to be staying much longer.

"Where's the LT?"

Sergeant Thiago Carvalho, manning a control console, turned to Arik. He shook his head. "She didn't make it, was one of the first to go down when we were hit by the hives. You in charge, Gunny."

The Deltan turned to see the prone form of Lieutenant Yiigar lying on a stretcher and now covered with a blood soaked tarp. He allowed himself

only a short moment to grieve her passing. She had been an outstanding Marine and a fellow comrade for almost two years. She deserved better than to be taken out by a stray explosive round at the beginning of battle.

He uttered a quick prayer for her soul and then joined Carvalho by the console. "What we got, Thi?"

"Oh, you gonna love this, baby," he said with a grin. "They're hitting us from all over with everything they've got. They must be really mad we took one of their forward bases from right under their ugly noses."

The dark haired, broad shouldered Brazilian looked like he had been born to be a Marine and putting Arik's much more slender Deltan frame to shame. And yet even though the two of them could not have been more different in appearances and backgrounds, they had somehow become fast friends during this seemingly endless deployment.

"I do like making them mad," said Arik with his own little smile.

"I know you do but we really shouldn't stick around for this one, trust me."

Arik studied the screen and then pointed at the far east sector. "That's our way out of here. Get everyone we've got left to fortify the northern perimeter, that's where they're going to hit us next. We need to buy ourselves enough time to get out of this mess."

"You got it, Gunny," he said and relayed his orders.

The enemy carried out another strike and this one hit mere meters from the command room, blowing out all the windows and throwing everyone to the floor.

"That was a close one," said Carvalho as he picked himself back up.

"Double time," said Arik as soon as he was back on his feet himself and then headed towards the exit. He stopped halfway there, spotting Yiigar's body again. He turned around. "And Thi," he said and once he had his attention indicated to the dead lieutenant. "Nobody get's left behind."

Carvalho gave him a sober nod before he went back to issuing orders to the remaining men.

Arik turned out to be right. They were making their move from the north and they were bringing quite a force with them to do it with. Fortunately for the remaining Marines, they had a little bit of heavy ordnance left themselves.

"How many?"

“Enough to make them wish they hadn’t come here,” said Corporal Chuba Tinbu, the wiry thin Nigerian who was the unit’s heavy weapons expert and deadly accurate with his sniper rifle.

They were both standing in the base’s courtyard where most of the Marines had assembled to make their stand against the incoming enemy. Small explosions ripped into the ground all around them at irregular intervals, blowing up dust and dirt and occasionally hitting a building as well. Arik wasn’t too concerned. He knew their shields had a little bit of juice left still and their scatterers were in full effect. This meant it was fairly difficult for the enemy to target them with much accuracy.

The seemingly never-ending rain was pelting Arik’s face and his smooth bald head causing it to drip into his eyes. Like most others he had long since gotten used to it. He secured his combat helmet to get at least some relief.

Tinbu glanced right through the gaps in the walls and the shimmering shields which surrounded the base but offered less and less protection with every successive hit. Arik followed his glance and he could spot the first ground vehicles hovering through the narrow canyon and right towards their position. “Makes you wonder why they even bother,” he said. “There won’t be much left of this place once they get here. Why not just bomb it out of existence?”

“They want prisoners,” said Arik. “And we’re not going to give’em any.”

Tinbu nodded. “On you word, Gunny?”

Arik waited a little longer and until he could see the first signs of infantry units moving along with their vehicles. He wanted to do as much damage as he possibly could. “Light’em up and then haul ass out of here.”

The corporal nodded and turned to his men who had set up smart launchers in the courtyard. The mobile weapons platforms were not much more than tripods with a sphere the size of a bowling ball positioned on top of them.

The Deltan watched as the six devices came to live, the dark spheres readjusting quickly and then revealing a number of perforations within their smooth surface. Unlike a bowling ball however, putting one’s fingers into one of those would have equated to certain suicide.

The weapons erupted like fireworks, shooting their payloads high into the sky. Arik craned back his neck to see. Not all of the two dozen or

so missiles survived. Almost half were quickly cut down by the enemy's countermeasures.

There was still plenty left however and once they reached their designated altitude of two hundred meters, they erupted into dozens of smaller projectiles only to then come raining down on the advancing enemy like hellfire.

The destruction was impressive but Arik and the others had little time to bare witness as their enemies' response was almost immediate and devastating. Two of the launchers were ripped to shreds within moments, forcing the Marines manning them to desperately scramble for cover.

"Time to go," said Arik. "Set them to full auto and fall back."

Tinbu and the others wasted no time but Jonar Arik waited until the last man had stepped off the courtyard before he followed.

He ran into Carvalho just outside the east gate.

"That's everyone," he said when he saw the Deltan approach. "Just your beautiful ass left."

Arik wanted to shoot back a stingy retort but stopped suddenly when he spotted his friend's rifle go up, the muzzle pointing in his direction. Without a second thought Arik jumped forward and into the soft dirt.

Not a moment later Carvalho fired three quick bursts over his head.

When Arik turned to look behind him he could see three enemy soldiers cut down less than fifty meters away. He turned back towards Carvalho who quickly extended his hand. Arik took it without hesitation to pull himself off the ground. "Just can't let me die a noble death, can you?"

He grinned. "And break a thousand hearts? Fat chance I'll be responsible for that."

"I've been celibate for six years," the Deltan said as he began jogging alongside Carvalho to catch up with the rest of the unit.

"So he keeps saying and yet I'm not buying it for a minute. Not with all the ladies melting at the sight of those big blue eyes of yours."

"Jealous much?" he said with grin.

"Hell, yeah. Damn Deltans. It just ain't fair."

They stopped on a small hill a hundred meters or so from the base when they heard the telltale sound of fizzling out shields. Arik turned back to the base or what was left of it. The energy barrier surrounding the walls flashed a couple more times before it disappeared entirely. Then the hives moved in. Dozens of tiny little machines, flying in such tight formations

they looked like a swarm of bees. They were hundreds of times deadlier as they unleashed massive amounts of fire power, bombarding every square inch of exposed ground, ripping deep seams into the earth itself.

Then came the bombardment of their ground vessels still a good two hundred meters away. It systematically tore up one building after the next.

"Looks like they switched to a scorched earth approach after all," said Carvalho.

"How many did we lose?"

"Yiigar makes twelve," he said. "But we hurt them a lot more than they hurt us."

Arik nodded.

"Hey, you mind if I ask you a question, Gunny?"

The Deltan turned to look at the man at his side. He had known him for nearly two years now, ever since they had arrived on this world and in all that time he had never once sounded quite so serious. "No, Thi," he said. "I'm not helping you hook up with any of the women in the unit."

He guffawed. "That's what you say now. My plan is to keep at it until I wear you down," he said with a grin but then shook his head, his features turning serious again. "It's not what I meant to ask though."

He gave him a short nod to let him know to go on.

"You think it's all worth it?"

"Course it is. It's all working out exactly like the General predicted. We take their base, they send units to take it back and Fourth Battalion uses the distraction to hit them were it really hurts. It's a thing of beauty."

But the large Brazilian Marine continued to look pensive. "I mean all of this. The entire damn thing, you know? Goddamned planet in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes I wonder if there's any point to all of this."

Jonar Arik turned to regard his friend with a surprised look, not used to hearing him talk like this at all. "Well, stop wondering right now, Marine. The General knows precisely what we're doing here and you just gotta have faith in that. This is war and we're fighting for our gods given right to exist. And we'll take this fight wherever it may lead us. We'll beat this thing and this godsdamned, rain-cursed planet as well. But we gotta stay focused, Thi. We gotta stay strong. And we don't go home until the job's done."

"Victory through strength," Carvalho said, falling back onto the battle mantra their entire regiment had long since adopted.

"Oorah," Arik said. "Victory through strength."

"Oorah and right as rain, as usual, Gunny."

"Don't talk to me about rain."

They both laughed at that.

"Now let's haul ass, only a question of time until these guys decide to follow us," he said and with that turned and headed away from the stricken base with Carvalho close behind to get to their rallying point.

They didn't get all too far. At the edge of the canyon they found Chuba Tinbu and a dozen Marines crouching by the tree line.

Arik quickly noticed their tense body language and both he and Carvalho approached low and with caution.

"What's up, Chuba, why are we still in this damned valley?" he said quietly once he had taken a knee next to the corporal.

"Scout team says they detected some movement just beyond that ridge," he said and pointed at the small hilltop beyond the tree range which stood right between them and the canyon exit and their rallying point.

"Tricorders?" said Carvalho.

"Bloody useless," said Tinbu. "Scatterers are in full effect. Can't even tell if its ours or theirs but its scrambling all our scans to practically nothing."

"So we'll do this the old fashioned way," said Arik. "Nothing new there. Get second squad to move up along the tree line just beyond that clearing," he said, understanding that as the highest ranking Marine left in the unit, it was up to him to give all the orders now. "Prepare the rest of the platoon to stand by to move up slowly. If there is somebody there, I want us to outflank them before they can outflank us."

The Nigerian nodded sharply and relayed the orders via his personal com unit.

"I'd be more comfortable with some reinforcements," said Carvalho.

"So would I but you know that's not going to happen. Whatever is scrambling our sensors is doing the same for comms. Anything further away then line of sight is out of reach for now," he said and checked over his phaser rifle. "You ready?"

"Who wants to live forever, right?"

He uttered a short, subdued laugh. "We're not, they're not."

Then, when he received the signal from Tinbu that everyone was in position, he gave the order to advance.

They did so slowly, staying as low as possible and close to the underbrush, the intelligent camouflage of their fatigues adapting to their green and brown surroundings, making them nearly invisible.

Arik stopped and raised his fist to let the others know to follow suit when he thought he spotted a hidden figure close to a tree and less than twenty meters away. He wiped his wet face with the back of his hand, a temporary solution at best as the rain had not stopped since the night hours, and then activated the holographic targeting module on his helmet which slid over his right eye. It was designed to assist him in identifying targets but the heads-up display dancing in front of his vision was struggling to tell him anything of use. Frustrated he tapped the side of his helmet to allow the module to withdraw and brought up his rifle to take aim manually.

Carvalho gently touched his arm and he turned to look at his friend.

"Hear that?"

He didn't at first. But then it was quickly becoming unmistakable. It was a humming sound and it was getting louder by the second. He knew precisely what it meant. Trouble.

"Hives, get down!" he yelled just before he flattened himself to the ground, activating his personal shields as he did so.

Then the shooting started.

The miniature drones pelted their position and Arik could feel the impacts. Without his shields he would have been dead in seconds.

Dirt and dust quickly filled the air, along with smoke and the smell of burned soil.

Arik reached for his belt and unfastened a small cylindrical device, not much larger than his hand. One button press and a spike extended from one end. He drove it hard into the ground in front of him.

A bright blue light shot out from the device and straight up into the sky. When he looked up he could see the shield bubble had successfully formed. It wouldn't last long but hopefully just long enough to allow them to get to the rallying point and keep them safe from the threat from above.

"Move out, now," he screamed as he got back onto his feet.

A quick head count revealed that one man was down, taken out when he hadn't activated his shield quickly enough when the hives had attacked. Two Marines were carrying his lifeless body.

"Move, move, move," he shouted. "Get to the rallying point."

They had gotten less than a hundred meters when they encountered the next wave of opposition.

Arik fired before the first enemy soldier could take aim, ripping him off his feet.

He fired again, three shots in rapid succession, taking out two more.

A direct hit to his flank nearly threw him to the ground. A shrill warning sound from his belt let him know that his shield was almost gone.

He ignored it and kept firing.

And the enemy kept on coming.

He never stopped moving, firing to the left, to the right and directly in front of him at what he soon perceived to be nothing more than shadows.

But as their cries attested to, they had been alive.

When his rifle gave out he swiftly jammed a new power cell into it from his belt with practiced ease and kept on shooting.

"Go, go, go," he shouting, not knowing how many of his people were still with him.

He took another hit. This one forced him to his knees.

An enemy was bearing down on him, murderous fire in his eyes.

Arik took aim and pulled the triggering stub only to find that his rifle didn't fire.

Not enough time to reload. Without a second thought he launched the weapons like a spear at the incoming soldier.

The man avoided it at the last moment.

Arik reached for his sidearm with lightning fast reflexes and this time the still approaching soldier was not fast enough to avoid the following blast into his chest.

Something hard and powerful hit him from the side and his phaser went flying out of his hand as Arik was thrown into the dirt.

An enemy had launched himself at him and after a very short struggle the soldier managed to get the upper hand, producing a large knife and bringing it swiftly down on the Marine below him.

At the last moment, Arik jerked his body to one side.

The knife missed him by inches, burring itself hilt deep into the dirt instead.

His opponent's eyes widened like saucers when he realized his fatal mistake.

Before the man could free his weapon, Arik had already slipped out his own knife from his thigh holster and promptly drove it deep into the man's side, catching him right underneath his protective armor.

They locked eyes for a brief moment, their faces just a few inches apart. For the first time Arik realized that he was really just a kid. Maybe eighteen or nineteen years old but not one year older. Panic gripped the soldier's face as his eyes pleaded with him, trying to somehow avoid what he must have already known was inevitable.

In a last, desperate effort, the young soldier managed to free his knife from where he had driven it into the ground.

Arik pushed his deeper into his flesh in response.

He moaned in pain but somehow managed the strength to still bring his razor-sharp blade down onto the Marine.

Fast like lightening, Arik pulled his knife out only to drive it back into his enemy, once, twice, until his hand was soaked with blood.

His opponent's knife ripped into his flank, tearing through his fatigues and flesh. But it was the last thing he did before he collapsed lifelessly on top of him.

Arik breathed hard, trying to focus on the pain at his side and willing it away. Then, with great effort, he pushed the dead soldier off of him.

He got back onto his hands and knees and looked up.

The battlefield was dense with the smoke of weapon's fire and he could see bright powerful discharges still blasting back and forth. But not much more.

He found a discarded rifle, not his own, and got back onto his feet. Gingerly touching his side, his hand came away with his thick and dark blood. His adrenaline kept him upright as he continued slowly towards the direction he believed the rallying point to be.

Arik wasn't sure how long he had walked until the fog finally began to lift and he could see the end of the canyon.

"Gunny?"

Chuba Tinbu rushed towards him and Arik could spot quite a few more of his people behind him. He had reached the rallying point. He felt an immense sense of relief take hold of him. Not so much that he had survived but that his unit had.

Tinbu looked bad himself. He had lost his combat jacket and his olive shirt he wore underneath had been ripped in various places. His dark skin was crisscrossed with wounds, none of which looked life threatening.

He helped the Deltan sit on a nearby rock and Arik considered the handful of men who had gotten out of the ambush. Most of them had made it. "Where's Thi?"

But Tinbu sadly shook his head. "I saw him take a blast right to the head with his shields gone. He didn't make it."

Arik felt fury swelling in chest. Then sickness. He turned away and emptied his stomach into an adjacent bush.

"Gunny, we need to get out of here."

He wiped his dirty face and found the corpsman, instructing her to come over, seal his wound and give him a stimulant.

But the woman didn't seem to like what she saw. "That's not going to be enough, Gunny. You need the hospital."

"Just do it," he hissed at her with such intensity she quickly did as she had been told.

Then he checked over his rifle. It had at least half a charge left and he had another power cell on his belt. He stood slowly with the help of the corpsman and looked back from where he had come. There wasn't much to see while the fog still settled. He took a deep breath then, feeling the powerful substances of the stimulant reenergizing his broken body. "We're going back."

"What?" Tinbu said, unable to hide his surprise.

Arik whirled around to face him and the other beaten and exhausted men. "We don't leave anyone behind. Ever."

The corporal still looked unconvinced.

Gunnery Sergeant Jonar Arik squared his shoulders and raised his chin, ignoring the pain in his side and his bruised muscles and limbs. "We've got men back there. Some may be dead already and some may still need our help. Regardless, we are Marines, we don't leave our men behind, alive or dead. And we don't *ever* go home until the job is done. Victory through strength."

"Oorah," Tinbu said.

"Victory through strength!" Arik roared back at him and his men.

"Oorah!" they shouted back with the same intensity.

And then Arik turned around and led his people back towards the battlefield. Marines didn't leave their own behind. And they didn't go home until the job was done.

## PART I THE ELUSIVE PEACE

### 1

#### THREE DAYS EARLIER

Nora Laas had started the trend but it pleased him to know that he had been one of the earliest adopters.

Most mornings at around 0600 hours So'Dan Leva, the half-Romulan tactical officer of the starship *Eagle* was out on D-corridor on deck eight, the widest corridor on the ship which completely circumnavigated the elliptically shaped saucer section, jogging alongside the Bajoran chief of security as part of their morning workout.

The tradition was nearly as old as their four-year service history on the ship except for that back in the early days they had made the thirteen laps mostly on their own. Now a great number of crewmen from all over the ship joined in. Most came out at some point after the duo was well into their third or fourth lap and many left before they had completed their full run. This came as little surprise as Leva and Nora prided themselves as being the most physically fit crewmembers on the ship. In fact Leva had to admit that Nora was even more so and part of that had to do with the fact that as the chief of security her job role was much more physically demanding than that of a tactical officer who spent most of his time on the bridge.

Leva had been a security chief once, on a starbase, while Nora had served as his lieutenant, and he had greatly enjoyed that position. But after a few years he had felt the desire to move on and return to serve on a starship. Only after accepting his new post had he learned that Captain Owens preferred to have the roles of security chief and tactical officer separated, instead of combining the position as was common on most other ships. Owens had given him a choice which of the two positions he wanted

to fill. After some consideration Leva had opted for the tactical post. Besides it being a bridge position, which kept him close to the pulse of the action, it had the added benefit of making him the ship's fourth-in-command by default, allowing him to pick up valuable command experience.

After he had made his choice, he was quick to recommend to Owens the best security officer he had ever known; Nora Laas. The Bajoran former resistance fighter and former Starfleet Marine had served with him with distinction on Deep Space Two and jumped at the opportunity to head her own team on *Eagle*.

Neither he nor Nora could have complained about their roles not keeping them sufficiently busy. In fact ever since the war with the Dominion had broken out nearly two years earlier, they had both had their hands full. More so than they could have ever wished for. Even though *Eagle* had not been purely used as a frontline vessel during this devastating conflict, she had seen her share of ugly combat duty and lost a number of her crew to the enemy, including her former first officer Gene Edison.

Edison had left a huge hole not just in *Eagle's* crew roster but also in the hearts of his colleagues who had considered him a friend. Leva had counted himself among those. Of course nobody had been more affected by his passing than Nora Laas who had become his lover only a few months before he had been killed.

Edison hadn't been replaced straight away, personnel shortages across the fleet had made that an impossibility, so instead *Eagle's* Vulcan chief science officer Xylion had stepped up to temporarily fill that position. This in turn had required Leva to take on more responsibilities as the ship's acting second officer. And he had risen to that challenge, even found it somewhat rewarding and perhaps for the first time in his life, had started to consider a career beyond being a tactical or security officer.

On this particular morning, Leva noticed a new face joining them on their morning run. It belonged to Tazla Star who had come aboard a year earlier to replace Xylion as acting executive officer.

The enigmatic red-haired Trill had brought with her a ton of baggage from her old job, even if most had little knowledge of what exactly it contained. All that Leva knew for certain was that she had been a starship captain for a short period of time until she had disobeyed orders which had led to the death of fellow officers. She had been court maritaled, stripped of

her rank and thrown into the Starfleet stockade until the outbreak of the war had required her temporary reinstatement.

When she had come onto *Eagle* very few people had trusted her. It hadn't been difficult to sense that this included the captain who had noticeably kept his new XO on a short leash. Nora hadn't gotten along with her at all, not just distrusting her but the security chief had almost gone out of her way to oppose Star at every opportunity which had presented itself. Her behavior had bordered on insubordination. Leva wasn't entirely sure how she'd had gotten away with it for as long as she had and suspected that much to their first officer's frustration, Captain Owens must have cut Nora a great amount of slack.

Things had gotten better between the two of them. Granted, they weren't exactly close friends but there now seemed to exist a grudging respect between the two women and even the captain had apparently decided to give Star the free reign one would expect a first officer on a ship the size of *Eagle* to have.

As for Leva, he couldn't help but feel at least slightly nostalgic for those times when his importance on *Eagle* had been a little more significant. Not that the war effort didn't keep him busy, but after Star had come aboard and once Owens had found it in himself to delegate more responsibilities her way, his had reduced as he fell back into the role of fourth officer.

By the time Nora and Leva were tackling their thirteenth lap, Star was already gone and so was most everyone else.

Alex Clancy, the ship's assistant counselor had joined them for a couple of laps at some point, casually conversing with the security chief and putting a little smirk on Leva's face, knowing that the two had become close after they had carried out a murder investigation some months ago. But Clancy was no runner and even Nora's company couldn't keep him at her side for long.

Only Major Cesar Wasco, the dark-haired and broad-shouldered Marine commander and some of his men were still hanging on. The Marines usually preferred to carry out their workout down on deck seventeen where their temporary barracks were located but from time to time Wasco and some of his officers would join them on their morning run.

*"Attention all personnel: Please report to your nearest crew lounge or monitoring station for an important announcement,"* said the disembodied voice of Lieutenant Commander Xylion coming over the ship's com.

Leva and the others came to a stop and the half-Romulan glanced curiously at his sweat-covered running partner. Nora's empty glance was proof that she too had no idea what this was about. Leva could in fact not remember the last time the entire crew had been asked to prepare for an announcement. Whatever had happened, it was big news.

The Bajoran understood this as well and they quickly made their way towards the Nest, *Eagle's* largest crew lounge which was located just a deck below them and at the very forward part of the saucer section.

After a very short turbolift ride they, along others, streamed into the upper part of the lounge on deck nine and already found the room packed with crewmembers who were equally wondering what could have prompted this announcement.

Leva and Nora made their way to the railing which overlooked the lower part of the Nest and spotted Captain Michael Owens standing close to the bar and apparently waiting for the room to fill to capacity.

Then when he was satisfied, he glanced at Xylion who stood nearby. The Vulcan activated a control panel which caused the bosun's whistle to sound throughout the ship and presumably also stream the captain's voice and image to various monitors all over *Eagle*.

The room fell dead silent.

The captain cleared his throat and then slowly took in the scene before him of the packed crew lounge and the faces of dozens of people eagerly expecting his words.

"It is with great joy and immense relief that I can announce that as of two hours ago, the Dominion forces along with their Breen and Cardassian allies have formally and unconditionally surrendered to the Federation Alliance."

The crowd's only reaction was an audible gasp. Otherwise the room fell back into surprising stillness almost as if everyone was collectively holding their breath. As if the slightest noise or exhalation would reveal these news to be far too good to be true.

"The war is over," Owens said resolutely to shake off any lingering doubts his audience seemed to be clinging on to. A broad smile broke his visage which perhaps said even more than his words had. To Leva it seemed as if months of pain and suffering had suddenly fallen off his captain's shoulders. He seemed genuinely more pleased, more relaxed, maybe even prouder than he had seen him in a very long time as he stood

there in front of his crew with whom he had been to hell and back with over the last few months. He looked very much like a man reborn.

And then the crowd finally began to come out of their momentary stupor as the enormity of the announcement had finally fully sunken in.

There were cries of jubilation all around, crewmembers shaking hands, hugging each other, some even crying now that the bitter war which had cost so many lives had finally come to an end.

Leva felt similar. But besides a sense of elation he also couldn't help but feel a sense of pride swelling in his chest. The sense of having faced the worst their enemy had been able to throw at him and his comrades and yet coming out still standing at the end. Not unscathed of course. He didn't think he'd ever be able to wash away the pain of the many lives that had been lost, the many friends and people he had known well, but in the end their deaths had not been in vain. They had come away victorious.

He turned to see Nora Laas with a huge smile on her face and without having to exchange a single word they quickly hugged each other tightly. The way the Bajoran relaxed in his arms, he knew she was just as relieved as the rest of the crew.

Neither of them had any words to offer after they separated again and instead decided to watch the crowd around them and enjoyed the impromptu celebrations which had erupted.

It was then that Leva spotted Atticus West from the corner of his eye.

Of course the man was not difficult to spot in any crowd. Tall, completely bald, dark-skinned and with a full, lush beard covering much of his face, West was not a man who blended in easily which was odd considering his profession.

He had come aboard *Eagle* just a couple of weeks ago as a reporter for the Federation News Service to follow a tradition almost as old as war itself, to report and write about what happened on the front lines for those lightyears removed from it.

Leva had found West affable enough, an easygoing kind of guy who while unable to blend into a crowd physically, had little trouble striking up a conversation and making friends. A skill which doubtlessly helped him immensely in his chosen field of work.

The reporter was a bit of a celebrity in fact and a few years before the war he had made a name for himself after uncovering a corruption scandal which had reached into the highest circles of the Federation Council. The

unprecedented investigation that had followed had led to numerous arrests and even the resignation of a senior Federation councilor.

Leva didn't think he had broken any other major stories since that time and being imbedded with *Eagle* had felt to him a little bit like an attempt to regain some of his former glory. He doubted he'd been able to this with great success so far.

"Lieutenant Nora, Commander Leva," he said as he pushed himself through the crowd. "A few comments about your reactions to the news of the Dominion's surrender? People are going to love hearing the thoughts of the front line heroes."

"Heroes?" said the Romulan and grinned before looking at Nora. "How about it Laas, how does it feel being a hero?"

Her only response was a heartfelt laugh.

West was undeterred. "It's what they'll call you back home, you know? If you like it or not, you and your people will be celebrated and paraded around as if you single-handedly won the war. Give me your take on this. Tell me the story of the reluctant heroes, the unwilling soldiers forced to do battle. What do they do now that there are no more enemies to conquer?"

At that Nora's smile turned into a frown. "We didn't conquer anything, Mister West. We fought for our freedom. For our right to exist. And many gave their lives so the rest of us could carry on."

She didn't have to say it but Leva immediately realized that her thoughts were with Gene Edison who had literally given his life for hers.

"Of course, I didn't mean any offense, I'm just looking for the angle that will make folks back home relate to the sacrifices you and your fellow men have made," said West.

It was obvious that the topic of conversation was turning Nora Laas's jubilation into annoyance and Leva felt much the same way. And the last thing he wanted after hearing the good news was to feel anger. "Let's get out of here," he said and Nora was more than willing to join him in finding a quieter place to celebrate and perhaps even reminisce and remember those who were no longer around.

But West was apparently already seeing the headline in his mind and tried once more to get his story from walking out on him. "Come on, guys, just a little interview."

Leva turned back to him. "Not everything has an angle, Mister West. Not everything has to be a story."

“That’s where you’re wrong, Commander. Everything’s a story.”  
That was the last thing Leva heard the reporter say before he along with  
Nora Laas slipped out of the Nest.

By the time Tazla Star got back to her quarters she couldn't wait to get out of her sweaty running clothes and take a cleansing sonic shower.

The morning's unexpected events had thrown off her routine and peace or no peace, she was eager to fall back into well-practiced customs. For Star routine was important. It was what kept her sane, considering the little sleep she got every night. And those few hours she did spend unconscious were usually haunted by dark nightmares about a past that wouldn't let her go, no matter how hard she tried.

It hadn't always been like this.

Even though her beginnings remained as mysterious to her as to most everybody else. All she knew for certain was that she had been born somewhere in the Jordan sector and that less than a year after her birth she had been dropped off by parties unknown, perhaps her biological parents, at Starbase 212. She had no idea why she had not been wanted and in truth she had long since overcome any feelings of inadequacy which may have resulted from this rejection so early in her life. Or so the counselors had told her.

Genetic testing had eventually established her family line. While it had not helped to identify her parents, authorities had been able to locate a distant relative on Trill who was willing to take her in and raise her.

Despite all of this or perhaps because of it, Tazla had worked hard to get into both Starfleet Academy and into the much coveted symbiosis program where she was eventually joined with the long-lived Star symbiont.

Everything changed after her joining. While she had been a driven individual even before, she suddenly became almost obsessed with getting ahead in life and her career after she had become one with Star.

And yet she didn't blame the symbiont for the mistakes she had made. She didn't blame it for falling for the alluring promises of a self-serving Starfleet intelligence agent, offering her career advancements and even her own starship someday if only she dedicated her life fully to his cause. She didn't blame it for deciding to get addicted to a powerful drug in order to infiltrate the notorious Orion Syndicate and she also didn't blame it for disobeying orders and thereby, at least indirectly, getting a lot of good people killed.

No, those had all been her mistakes. Tazla's mistakes. And she knew she'd pay for them for the rest of her life.

Her door annunciator sounded before she could make it towards the washroom to get that much needed shower.

With a heavy sigh she turned towards the doors. Yes, she had become a creature of habit but the routine this visitor promised to bring was not one she was looking forward to. Cognizant that the last thing she needed was to keep him waiting outside her quarters, he quickly asked him to enter.

The doors parted and Elijah Katanga slid inside.

The dark-skinned, gray-haired and bearded doctor was long past his prime. At least as far as his age was concerned. From simply looking at his trim and erect posture it was difficult to guess that this man had served in Starfleet for the better part of the century.

"Anybody see you come in?"

The veteran physician shook his head. "Not a soul."

"Are you sure?"

He offered a dramatic sigh in response and placed the medkit he had brought on Star's desk. "Will you relax, Dez. Nobody saw me. And even if they did, there is nothing odd about me coming to see an old friend." The ship's chief medical officer had a tendency to fall back into the habit of calling her by the name of Star's previous host, the one who had been such a close friend to him once.

She pointed at the medkit. "Carrying that?"

"So what? Maybe I'm performing a routine physical while I'm here. I've been known to make house calls now and then." He considered her sternly. "Stop being so paranoid for Christ's sake. Believe it or not, I've been around long enough to know how to make a couple of excuses when the occasion requires it."

But her mind had not been put at ease at all and she let herself fall into one of the large chairs. "I just don't know if I can keep doing this, Eli."

"Nonsense, you're doing great."

She shook her head. "You're wrong. You want to know what the first thing that popped into my mind was after the captain announced the end of the war?" She didn't wait for his response. "I thought that with news that big, you probably wouldn't make today's session. And I felt relieved."

He took a couple of steps towards her. "You've been making great progress, we can't stop now."

"You call this progress? We've been doing this for how long now? Seven, eight months? Three days a week. And nothing has really changed."

Katanga walked over to the replicator. "I told you when we first started this that it wouldn't be quick or easy, Taz. But we're getting there. You'll just have to stick with it."

She leaned forward in her chair. "The problem is, I can't see it."

He retrieved one tall glass of cold water from the replicator and handed it to her. "How'd you sleep last night?"

She took the water and let herself fall back. "Four hours, maybe. Not more than usual."

He nodded. "Dreams?"

"The customary fare of surrealistic nightmares. I think I was stuck in a Salvador Dalí painting this time. And if you think me being sweaty is bad, you have no idea how terrible I look fully melted."

"How about when you woke up?"

She actually had to think about that for a moment.

"Anything different?"

"I wasn't covered in sweat," she said quietly when she realized the change herself. It had become normal that she was almost soaked through by the time she awoke in the morning. One of the side-effects of her condition.

"That's progress."

She quickly dismissed it. "That's progress? I didn't wake up sweating? So what in another year's time I get five hours of sleep instead of four?" Clearly frustrated she stood up. "At that pace I'll be cured of this cursed thing by the time they dig my grave. I can't keep doing this. People will eventually find out and I can think of at least a handful of admirals who would love to use this to kick me out of the fleet for good."

The doctor shook his head. "I don't think it'll take that long. It took a while for your antibodies to get used to the compound I've developed. It'll take a little while longer to balance your system but now that we've seen the first signs of improvements, the end is in sight." He opened the medikit to retrieve a couple of hyposprays.

"That's easy for you to say, you're not the one who gets shot full of your burning poison three times a week."

Katanga whirled around and tossed one of the hypos at her. Star nearly didn't see it coming but managed to snap it out of the air just before it could hit her in the head.

“Hey.”

“Stop your moaning and whining, young lady. The alternative is you go back to being that junkie the Orion Syndicate turned you into and pump your body full of real poison until it destroys your mind and finally breaks down your body as well. And how long do you think you’d be able to keep that a secret? You want a shot at being a real person, a real Starfleet officer again, and not a slave to a compound you cannot control, well, this is the only way. It’s going to be hard and it’s going to be painful but I know you Tazla Star. You are a strong woman. Or was that somebody else who jumped out of an aircraft without a parachute, or who nearly scarified herself being cooked alive by radiation to save the ship from going up like an infernal fireball?”

She looked at the man with a shocked expression, not having realized, or perhaps having forgotten, how much heat he could muster with his gravelly voice even after all these years. How hard he could hit you with the truth. Then she allowed herself a smirk. “I guess I’m not afraid to die.”

But Katanga’s visage remained stone faced as he took a step closer. “No Taz, you’re not afraid to die. You’re afraid to live.”

It took her a moment to agree to that seemingly keen observation and then nodded slowly before she considered that hypo he had tossed her. She knew it contained Syndicate-Y, the drug her body had craved for a very long time. One designed to tie syndicate members to the nefarious criminal organization for a lifetime. She knew that all it took was to push it against her neck and all the anxiety and creeping fears would vanish. Along with any progress they had made over the last few months to free her from that aching desire.

She tossed it back. “You know, I’ve really not felt like taking another hit for a few days now.”

He caught it easily and put it back into his kit. “And that’s what we in the medical community like to call progress.” He turned back to face her, this time holding up a hypo-spray with an entirely different content. One that was going to hurt her in the short-term but was supposed to eventually free her for good. “Now, take off your clothes and tuck yourself in. It’s time for your medicine.”

Her smirk returned. “We may be old friends but with this body I’m really not inclined to strip down in front of you.”

“Dear girl, I’m a doctor. There’s nothing there I haven’t seen before.”

"Be that as it may." She shot him another little smile over her shoulder before heading towards her bedroom. Once out of sight she quickly removed her sweaty exercise gear, laid down in bed and as the doctor had suggested, tucked herself in.

Katanga joined her shortly after with his medkit, placing a few neural monitors on her forehead.

"Eli?"

He looked into her green eyes.

"Thanks for that prep talk."

He shook his head. "It was nothing you didn't already know."

"Maybe but I think I needed to hear it."

Once he was done with the monitors and he had double-checked the dosage in the hypo he glanced once more her way. "Ready?"

She nodded. "My shift starts in four hours."

"You won't be out more than three," he said reassuringly. "Now this may sting a little."

Star couldn't suppress a last grin. "You may be a terrific doctor, Eli, but you're such a lousy liar."

And then he pressed the hypo against her carotid artery at her neck.

"If anything should happen." It had become a well-practiced line. After all they had gone through these motions over a dozen times now.

"I'll be right here." He gently took her hand into his, squeezing slightly.

She offered a grateful nod before she let her head fall down onto the pillow and looked straight up at the ceiling. "Here comes the fun part." She gritted her teeth when she felt the first ambers of pain coursing through her body.

Tazla Star was grateful that her quarters were soundproof. After a few minutes her screams came to an end and she mercifully drifted to sleep, secure in the knowledge that her old friend would remain at her side until the end.

The sense of general euphoria on *Eagle* was still noticeable even a couple of days after the victory announcement. It could be seen on the smiling and much more relaxed faces of pretty much everyone onboard, Vulcans excluded. It could be heard in the conversations of crewmembers discussing their upcoming shore leave plans, many enthusiastically awaiting the end of the stop-loss order to return to their families. And it could be felt in the general attitude of people who until recently were faced with a bloody war which had threatened to drag on for years to come.

But now, the Treaty of Bajor was officially signed, the Dominion and its allies had surrendered and for the first time in a very long time, there were no more enemies to fight. No Jem'Hadar, Cardassians or even Klingons to face in battle. For whatever short period it would last, the galaxy seemed to be at peace.

Of course not all news were good. Overall Federation casualty numbers were still being calculated and had a tendency to creep up every day. And reports had been coming in that as a final, punishing effort, the Dominion had nearly obliterated the home world of their former chief ally in the Alpha Quadrant, killing hundreds of millions of Cardassians.

But for now at least, the good news outweighed the bad and the mood in the Nest was festive.

"So then I told him that he could take that photon grenade and shove it into a place where the artificial illumination wouldn't reach it." Nora Laas chuckled at her own anecdote, sitting at a table opposite So'Dan Leva.

Leva offered little more than a subdued smirk.

The Bajoran frowned. "What? That was a funny story."

"Can I be honest?"

She nodded.

"Funny stories aren't your thing."

Nora scowled at him. "Yes, they are. I tell funny stories all the time."

"Really? What's the last funny story you've told?"

She had to actually think about that for a moment. "How about the one with the clown and the Ferengi in the gorilla suit?" She chuckled again, apparently recalling the story quite vividly. "That was pretty funny."

He rolled his eyes. "You told that joke about four years ago and it was an old one even then."

That made her pensive.

"Don't worry too much about it. You have plenty of other great skills."

"I suppose so. But you know what? I'm actually quite happy that I won't have to use those kind of skills for while. At least not as much as I used to over the last two years. I might need to start thinking about acquiring a new skill set altogether."

"Sure." He aimed another grin her way. "You could try and take up knitting. Just do us all a favor and stay away from trying to be a jokester."

She kicked him under the table and put on a mock frown. "Fine. Why don't you tell me a funny story then? I'm sure you're just full of them."

He sighed heavily and then took a sip from his Romulan Ale. He had used to hate the stuff but ever since he had gone on a mission to Romulus a year earlier, he had grown fond of the beverage. Of course the synthehol-based replicator imitation was a pale shadow compared to the real thing. But regardless of how weak of a reproduction it was, the taste still tended to bring a smile to his face when it made him remember the extraordinary woman who had introduced him to it in the first place. That was not a story he felt like telling Nora at the moment. In fact he couldn't think of anything funny to say. "Things are changing."

"Yes, they are. For the better."

But he shook his head. "I mean on *Eagle*."

A quizzical look remained her only response.

"We lost a lot of good people over the years. It's becoming a very different place."

She didn't immediately respond to that. "I suppose change is part of life."

"I've been thinking that perhaps the time has come to make a change myself."

"What kind of change?"

"A career move. I've been a tactical or security officer for fourteen years, ever since I graduated from the Academy. It's not as if I haven't enjoyed it. I've certainly never regretted my career choices or serving on *Eagle* but I worry sometimes that maybe I've become too comfortable here. Many of my Academy classmates have long since moved on to bigger things. Maybe it's time I did the same."

He could tell that Nora was entirely surprised by this admission. Perhaps he had surprised himself a little. "I had no idea you felt like that. Where's all this coming from?"

"I think mostly from the time I served as second officer, before Star came aboard. Then I got on offer last night from Starfleet."

Nora's eyes grew wider. "Starfleet? What is it?"

"It's this big intergalactic organization we all work for, but that's not important right now."

She aimed him an annoyed look at his lame attempt of a joke.

His smile turned more serious. "First officer."

"Congratulations. Do you know what ship?"

He shook his head. "No, it didn't say. To be honest the whole thing looked very standardized. As if some computer back on Earth spat out a thousand of those things and sent them out randomly."

"I supposed it makes sense that they are looking for experienced officers to spread around after the casualties we've had. They'll need qualified people all over," she said. "But I don't believe for one minute this was a random thing. They looked at your record and knew exactly what they had."

He shrugged. He wasn't so sure if he believed that. There was no doubt of course that Starfleet was going to be desperate to promote officers and assign them to where they were required the most. And his observation regarding changes notwithstanding, in actuality *Eagle* hadn't fared nearly as bad as many other ships which had suffered much more significant loses during the war.

"Sounds to me as if you've pretty much made up your mind about this."

"I think so."

Nora nodded slowly and looked off into space, her mood had clearly taken a hit.

"Hey." He leaned towards her. "It's a small galaxy, right?"

"I suppose it is." She made eye contact again. "I guess I've just gotten used to working with my closest friends over the years. It's going to be different without you around. I'm still trying to get used to Star and Katanga. It's all changing."

"Part of life?" He shot her another smirk, offering the same words she had used.

“Yeah.” She quickly put her smile back on. “And it’s a great opportunity and I’m really happy for you. First officer is a big step up and I have no doubt you’ll excel at it. Who knows, in a couple of years you might be commanding your own ship.”

He laughed at that. Leva had never really aspired to his own command. Initially he had joined Starfleet just to get away from Earth, his adopted home world. A place where he had never felt like he had truly belonged. Returning to Romulan space had not ever really been an option either. For a time he had thought that he had found on *Eagle* what he had always been looking for. A home. But now as opportunity was knocking, perhaps it was time to rise to new challenges. To think about his career for a change. “Captain So’Dan Leva. It does have a ring to it. And I know just the right kind of person to be my XO when my time comes.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Lieutenant Trinik. He’s a damn fine officer and overdue a promotion. He’d be perfect for the job.”

She gave him another swift kick under the table just before they both broke out laughing.

\* \* \*

Leva had left the Nest to make his preparations to leave the ship, including having what would likely be a difficult discussion with Captain Owens. He had clearly made up his mind about the issue and there was little Nora Laas could do about it. Nor was she sure she should.

Of course she was sad to see him go. Considering its size, it was a rare occasion in Starfleet to be able to work with a friend, so seeing him moving on to a new assignment stung, probably more so than when Doctor Wenera had left the ship months earlier.

For Nora as well as for most of her fellow officers, especially on the senior staff, *Eagle* had always been more than just another assignment and she had assumed the same to be true for Leva. That Starfleet wasn’t merely a chosen career path but a lifestyle choice. Sure, she could have worked on getting that next promotion she knew she deserved. Perhaps put in for an assignment on a larger ship or even a massive starbase where she’d have a team three or four times the size of her current department to look after.

But then again, *Eagle* felt right to her. With no other place to really call home anymore, this ship and the people who crewed her had now taken that spot in her heart. It was what she was passionate about and what she was most willing to defend, even give her life for if it became necessary.

And it wasn't as if *Eagle* was a boring assignment. The opposite was true and in fact she had stopped counting the many times when she had come fairly close to having to sacrifice her life for her friends or colleagues.

Nora had been raised a fighter. Not by choice but by circumstance and necessity. The truth she didn't go out of her way to share with the rest of the universe however, was that she was pretty sick of fighting. Be it the Cardassians, the Tzenkethi, the Borg, the Klingons or the Dominion. Like many others she had felt an immense relief that at least for the immediate future, she didn't have to pick up a weapon and defend what was most dear to her.

With that pleasant thought on her mind, she made her way across the Nest after Leva had left and promptly found her other good friend, current chief engineer and her former Academy roommate Louise Hopkins who was having dinner with their Krellonian helmsman Lif Culsten.

Only after she had already approached the table did she notice that the sandy blond woman had been deeply in conversation with the earless young man whose silver hair was as long as Hopkins' except that he wore his in a neat little ponytail. It was the kind of conversations which had put smiles on both their faces. For a moment she felt like an unwelcome intruder.

Hopkins and Culsten stopped themselves suddenly when they spotted the Bajoran hovering over their table and Nora was sure she could see Louise blushing ever so slightly.

"Am I interrupting something?" She couldn't shake the feeling that she really was.

Both of them spoke up in unison and somewhat clumsily. "No, not at all."

Nora didn't buy it.

But Hopkins was already indicating to another chair. "Take a seat. Join us."

"Take mine." Culsten stood and picked up his plate. "I'm done anyway and I've got a late shift on the bridge." He glanced at Hopkins. "Lieutenant." Then he briefly looked at Nora and added another, "Lieutenant," almost as an afterthought before he quickly departed.

Nora took his seat and looked after the Krellonian making what seemed to be a swift escape. She turned back towards her friend. "Lieutenant?" She raised an eyebrow. "Now, I know something's up."

"He's just being polite." Hopkins made an effort to focus on her unfinished meal.

"Is that what that was?"

She shrugged her slim shoulders barely making eye contact. "Or maybe he's trying to be funny. You know how he is."

"Lou?"

She looked up and straight into the Bajoran's intense eyes. "Huh?"

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're not ..."

"What?" she said a little bit too quickly. "No, of course not."

"Lou?"

"We're just friends."

Her suspicions did not abate. "Do I really have to remind you about the last time you were involved with a Krellonian? That didn't turn out too well for anybody." She was referring to her secret affair with one of her engineers earlier in the year who had not only ended up dead but had also turned out to be a spy.

Hopkins' eyes hardened. "Now that's not fair and completely different. First of all Lif is not my subordinate. At least not really. Second, I've known him for years and third ..." She stopped, clearly she didn't have a third point ready. "And third, we're just friends."

Nora raised her hands defensively. "Alright, alright."

"That's right." A triumphant smile came over her lips as she spotted somebody at a nearby table. "We're just friends just like you and Alex Clancy." She indicated towards where the brown-haired assistant counselor sat just a few tables over. He greeted them with a quick wave when their eyes met.

Nora returned the gesture a little awkwardly before turning back to her companion. "That's totally different. We're just —"

"Friends? You mean like me and Lif?"

She nodded slowly, acceding the point.

But before the conversation about possible friends or otherwise could continue, another man approached the table. Nora recognized him

immediately, after all he wasn't exactly difficult to pick out of a crowd with his large frame and large, bald pate.

"Ladies." He offered them a disarming smile. "Do you have room for one more?"

"Pull up a chair, Mister West." Hopkins was a little quicker than Nora had expected from the usually shy chief engineer. Clearly she was eager to change the topic of conversation.

He sat down at the table. "Very kind of you."

"So, Mister West, how's the search for your next big story going?" said Nora. "Is peace turning out to be as good for business as war?"

He laughed at that. "I'm not in this for the business side of things, Lieutenant."

"You're just trying to make a name for yourself." She offered a little smile. "Or perhaps regain lost glory?"

It had been intended as a stinger but Atticus West didn't rise to the bait. "My interest is the truth. I think people have a right to it."

Hopkins seemed intrigued. "And what's the truth?"

"It's usually whatever the powers that be don't want you to know."

Nora shook her head slightly. "I don't think you're going to find any conspiracies on this ship, Mister West."

"I wouldn't be so sure." He glanced at his padd. "In fact I'm working on a new story which could turn out to be very interesting indeed. It's what brought me to your table today."

"What is it about?" Hopkins was apparently already hooked.

And he was all too happy to oblige. "I'm writing an expose on your first officer. Commander Tazla Star."

Nora frowned. "We just signed a peace treaty with the Dominion after nearly two years of brutal warfare. The quadrant may be experiencing the first lasting peace in half a decade and you're focusing on Star?"

"Trust me, more than enough journalists out there are going to tell that story and I'm not interested in reporting on the obvious. I prefer to boldly go where others have not." His smirk widened, seemingly quite fond of his little play on the Starfleet charter.

The Bajoran gave him a hard look. "I don't like the idea of you starting to snoop around in a crewmember's life."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that." West regarded his padd once more. "From what I've been told you and the commander didn't get along at all. '*A disgrace to the uniform,*' '*unfit to serve,*' and '*no business being on*

Eagle,' are just a few juicy quotes of yours regarding Commander Star that I've been able to dig up."

Nora squirmed at having her own words thrown back into her face. There was little doubt they were hers, she recognized them alright but she hadn't thought they had become part of the official record. "You've taken the things I've said out of context." She knew she sounded as lame as a politician who had been caught in an obvious gaffe, trying to do damage control when it was clearly already far too late for that. "Besides, I may have been a little harsh and premature about my impression of Commander Star."

West nodded as he glanced back at his padd. "Apparently your views on this matter changed quite a bit earlier this year. Any particular reason for that sudden change of heart?"

Nora did her best to try and hide the anger she was beginning to feel rising in her chest. This man had done his homework and done it well. She glanced at Hopkins and she could see her eyes widening slightly as she considered her friend.

The truth was that Nora had struck a deal with Star back then. The first officer would not seek to prosecute Hopkins and Culsten for their knowledge of a spy operating on *Eagle* and in turn the security chief would drop her constant opposition to Star.

Since having made that deal, Nora had come to realize that it hadn't been much of a deal at all. Regardless of her personal feelings towards the first officer, Star did deserve respect and obedience by the virtue of her rank and position and she understood now that her initial opposition had been mostly borne from the pain she had still felt over Gene Edison's death. Star didn't have to make a deal at all for something that really hadn't been optional to begin with. And yet she had been willing to save Hopkins and Culsten from a fate which would have almost guaranteed their dismissal from Starfleet and possibly even prison time.

She had never discussed this with Louise but judging by her look now, it was clear that she had at least an inkling about the back room discussions which had spared her from losing what she cared for the most.

West was too good at his job as not to notice the sudden reticence at the table about discussing this particular subject and moved on for now. "In any case, I don't see why you should be so concerned. On the surface this is a terrific story of redemption. A story about a disgraced Starfleet captain, losing her command, her rank and her freedom only to be given a

second chance and becoming a valuable member of a starship crew once more.”

Nora shot the man another hard glance. “But that’s not the story that has your interest roused, is it?”

He nodded. “I do tend to look a little deeper. After all, that’s where people bury the truth. And something tells me there’s a lot to dig up here.”

“I would seriously suggest that you stay away from this particular story and perhaps focus on something else? What happened to your heroes of the Federation angle?”

West smirked. “I believe you and your friend talked me out of that one.”

Nora cursed herself for that now. But how could she have possibly foreseen that her reluctance to speak about her war record would cause the man to turn his sights on Star instead? “Leave this one alone, Mister West.”

“Oh the times I’ve heard those words.”

“I’m being serious.”

“You’re warning me off, Lieutenant? For the record, are you doing so in your official capacity as the chief of security of this vessel?”

Nora stood suddenly and after a moment Hopkins followed suit. “I think this conversation is over.” She turned away and they both left the table. She knew it was nothing more than a tactical retreat and if she had judged Atticus West correctly, it had accomplished nothing than to further cement his resolve in pursuing his story.

When Michael Owens stepped into the observation lounge on deck two, he found his crew, as was usual, already assembled and engaged in light conversation with each other. What was far less customary however was the light tone and general good mood that seemed to have gripped his senior officers. It was fairly similar to what he had encountered everywhere on the ship ever since his announcement two days earlier.

It was also very much the way he had felt himself when he had first been given the news by Admiral Throl. It had felt like a massive weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He hadn't really allowed himself to celebrate just yet. The wounds were still too fresh and it would take a long time for him and many other people, including the Federation itself, to heal from the physical as well as the psychological damage that the Dominion had wrecked in their obsessive desire to expand their control over the Alpha and Beta Quadrants.

Too many had lost their lives in the defense of freedom, too many sacrifices had been made in his opinion to allow oneself much more than a sense of finality and the knowledge that the time for bloodshed was finally at an end. The war was over. Now was the time for the healing to start.

Owens took his usual seat at the head of the table and watched as the faces of his officers turned to consider him expectantly.

There was Tazla Star, his fire red haired Trill first officer who had come aboard under rather suspect circumstances but who had since proved herself again and again as being more than willing to turn a new leaf and serve him and his ship. He had very nearly come to regret his decision of keeping her on board, unable to bring himself to fully trust her but had since mostly overcome his hesitations. She wasn't Gene Edison, that was for sure, but she was well on her way to become just as efficient and reliable as his previous executive officer.

Then there was Elijah Katanga, sitting next to Star. Owens knew that the veteran doctor had been close with Star's previous host and it appeared they had picked up just where they had left off. He couldn't deny that he appreciated Star acting as a bit of a buffer between them. Katanga was a genius in his field, a legend in Starfleet Medical circles in fact. Unfortunately the octogenarian also possessed the crusty stubbornness to

prove it. It had been a battle just to get him to agree to wear his uniform jacket, which Owens noticed he wore unzipped, no doubt as a final act of proudly declaring his defiance to conformity.

His Vulcan science officer was predictably the last person in the room on which the Treaty of Bajor seemed to have had any kind of emotional effect. True to his heritage, Xylion was a steady rock of stoicism. Of course he didn't like to talk about the few times when his logic had slipped, even if ever so slightly, such as when he had agreed to stay behind on a rogue planet with a group of stranded Vulcans. In his defense, he had been blackmailed into doing so but some speculated that perhaps a young and attractive Vulcan woman had ultimately swayed his decision on the matter.

Owens couldn't help but consider So'Dan Leva with some sadness. The half Romulan had only just informed him that he would be leaving the ship to accept an offer to become a first officer somewhere else. He couldn't blame him for wishing to further his career and understood that it was not an option he had on *Eagle*. A year earlier there may have been an opportunity but for now Star was firmly entrenched in her role. He still hated the idea of losing an officer of such experience and skill. And as Starfleet was in dire need of senior officers, and *Eagle* currently had enough trained people who could fill his position, Leva was due to leave the ship within the next twenty-four hours.

He knew Leva and Nora were close friends and he could see in her eyes, whenever she looked at him, that she was particularly sad to see him go. Owens had been worried about Nora Laas for a long time. Ever since she had lost Gene Edison she hadn't been quite herself, as if she had lost something of herself along with him. It had never been more obvious than after Tazla Star had come aboard and when it had appeared as if she had directed all her anger and frustration towards their new first officer who had replaced her dead lover. Fortunately Star had somehow managed to smooth things over with the Bajoran and the two were actually working quite well together now.

DeMara Deen, his close personal friend, operations officer and eternal optimist hadn't had much to be optimistic about over the last couple of years. Not that she didn't try. Her aura which she had inherited from her people had worked overtime to try and make people feel just a little bit better about the universe and themselves. But often it looked that even that wasn't enough to cut through the persistent wartime gloom. And of course it hadn't escaped his notice that for all of her buoyancy, Dee had

seemed angrier and more frustrated the longer the conflict had carried on. She had never known war or significant violence before she had joined Starfleet and sometimes he felt that the experience had changed her. Thankfully over the last two days the Tenarian had appeared much more than her old self again, smiling, telling jokes and being the ship's unofficial morale officer. He took it as a sign that there was hope for DeMara Deen yet.

The other officers had been similarly affected by the renewed hopeful spirit coursing through the ship.

Chief Engineer Louise Hopkins appeared much more upbeat lately and the same could be said for helmsman Lif Culsten. And Owens thought he could even see an amused little hint of a smile playing at the corners of Cesar Wasco's lips, the commander of the ship's Marine contingent and a man who tended to have such a serious demeanor, Owens sometimes wondered if the Marine had had his facial features surgically altered to display a permanent frown.

Owens cleared his throat. "I trust everyone's had a good few days of rest and is ready to go back to work. The war might be over but that doesn't mean we don't have things left to do. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if this new peace is going to keep us quite busy for a while."

Star nodded in agreement. "The damage the Dominion has done to the Alpha Quadrant will no doubt take years to fully overcome."

"Is it true what they say? That the Dominion tried to destroy Cardassia Prime?" Deen's purple eyes seemingly hoping it was not.

"Unfortunately, yes. And the casualty figures are still coming in. Initial accounts indicate that over six-hundred million Cardassians all over the union have lost their lives."

That put a quick damper on the otherwise high spirits which had been prevalent in the room. Yes, the war was finally over, their enemy defeated, but the Cardassians had paid a heavy price for their ambitions. And all the suffering they had been responsible for notwithstanding, it was difficult to accept that the general populace, millions of civilians, had deserved such a cruel fate because a handful of power-hungry individuals had steered Cardassia onto a course of self-destruction.

"They'll need all the help they can get."

This caused more than just a couple of officers to look at the most unlikely person in the room to have expressed such a sentiment.

But Nora Laas, the former Bajoran resistance fighter who had fought the occupiers of her home world since she had been able to first pick-up a weapon, held fast to her views. "I'm admittedly no fan of the Cardassians and some may call it poetic justice after all they have done to Bajor, but genocide is despicable and I would not wish that fate on my worst enemy."

Nobody in the room disagreed.

"Are those our new orders?" Katanga directed his old but not yet tired eyes at the captain. "To provide relief efforts to the Cardassians?"

Owens shook his head. "Starfleet along with rest of the occupational forces made up of the Klingons and the Romulans are mobilizing relief and reconstruction efforts as we speak but we're going elsewhere. For some months now Starfleet Command has lost contact with a military campaign being waged on the planet Valeria and resources have been spread too thin to investigate until now."

"Valeria was one of the first hot spots of the war." Leva regarded the captain and then the rest of the room. "We dispatched a sizable ground force to prevent the Dominion from gaining control of the surface early on in the war."

"That's correct." Owens nodded. "Communications have been unreliable ever since a number of subspace relay stations in that sector were destroyed and the system has been too remote to allow for other means of communication. According to the last reports we have, the ground war on Valeria was still in full swing but effectively at a stalemate. Starfleet believes that word of the Dominion surrender has not yet reached the troops on Valeria on either side."

"You're saying these kids are still fighting and killing each other even after the war has officially ended?" Doctor Elijah Katanga was clearly outraged by that idea.

"Continued hostilities and battles between belligerent parties even after a ceasefire or surrender has been declared are not unusual." Xylion regarded the African doctor with a dispassionate look. "There are ample historic examples of this in the history of your own home world, Doctor, such as the Battle of Issy following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, the Battle of Prague which was fought days after the German surrender in World War Two and the Battle of Galorndon Core which took place three months after Earth's victory in the Earth-Romulan War."

"My God, are you a man or a walking encyclopedia?" Katanga's question caused the Vulcan to raise a single eyebrow in response. "Besides,

those examples are all from times when communications were slow and unreliable. This is the twenty-fourth century for Christ's sake. We should be able to let people know when they can officially stop killing each other."

Owens jumped in before the doctor could carry on. He agreed with the sentiment and the outrage but he didn't have the inclination to allow the doctor to vent on the issue well into the night hours. If left unchecked, he was sure he would. "And that's where we come in. We've already changed course for Gamma Seven, a small outpost near the Cardassian border where we'll take onboard a senior Cardassian officer who will assist us with reaching out to the Cardassian forces on that world. From Gamma Seven it should take us no more than three days at high warp to reach Valeria."

Nora looked suspicious. "A Cardassian? And the Jem'Hadar will listen to him? Considering how their alliance turned out in the end, I find that hard to believe."

Owens shook his head slightly. "Starfleet is fairly certain that all Jem'Hadar forces on Valeria were pulled out nearly a year ago when the Dominion began to realize that the planet's diminishing strategic value no longer warranted the effort of fighting a ground war there. Intelligence suggests that only Cardassian troops have remained."

DeMara Deen leaned forward in her chair. "So the Dominion understood it was a pointless battle and left but we didn't? Why?"

Michael had asked himself that same question but had not yet come up with a satisfactory answer. "I won't claim to understand every decision Starfleet Command makes."

The doctor uttered a dismissive little grunt. "Perhaps because most of the time they tend to make no sense at all."

The captain moved on, glancing towards Major Wasco who hadn't spoken since the briefing had begun. "With the end of hostilities, the major and his men were due to depart *Eagle* at Gamma Seven for their next assignment. However, I've been able to convince him and his superiors to let us hold on to him and his company for the duration of this mission, seeing as the Starfleet ground forces on Valeria are made up almost exclusively by Marines. And I also understand that you have personal history with the man who is in charge of the troops there."

Wasco offered a crisp nod. "That is correct, sir. General Xiaogang Lam leads Second Regiment, Fourth Division on Valeria consisting of nearly fifty thousand Marines and support staff. General Lam is perhaps

one of the greatest strategic minds in the Federation today and has an outstanding service record. Many attribute our successes during the Cardassian Border Wars to his leadership and tactical acumen. And it is no secret that he is on the shortlist to become the next commandant of the Marine Corps."

Nora Laas nodded along, clearly agreeing with this assessment. Considering that she had served as a Marine during the Cardassian Wars herself, it came as little surprise that she too was familiar with Lam and his accomplishments.

"I personally believe that the general is mostly responsible for shaping the Corps into the efficient fighting force it is today. I'm also fortunate to be able to say that I served under his command for six years. He's been a mentor to me and taught me what it means to be a Marine. I learned more under his leadership than I ever did at command school."

Deen wasn't able to suppress a growing grin. "So you could say then that Lam is the very model of a modern major general and that he's got information vegetable, animal and mineral."

Owens rolled his eyes at this rather immature interruption, not that it came as a complete surprise from Deen.

"He knows the kings of England and he quotes the fights historical from Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical," added Louise Hopkins with a big smirk of her own.

"I believe," began Leva, equally amused, "he's well acquainted, too, with matters mathematical. He understands equations, both simple and quadratical."

Before Owens could put a stop to this impromptu outburst of silliness, Lif Culsten jumped in as well. "About binomial theorem he's teeming with a lot of news," he said. "And, wait for it – with many cheerful facts about the square of the hypotenuse."

The quartet was beaming with big smiles as if they were particularly proud of their accomplishment. Hopkins' and Culsten's were the first to falter when they spotted the captain's rather displeased glare. Nora and Wasco also did not look amused.

Tazla Star however couldn't keep herself from grinning. "I take it that the tradition of the annual performance of the Pirates of Penzance continued to be alive and well even after I left the Academy."

Michael's visage soften. "Let's just make sure we keep the urge of sudden outbursts of song to a minimum when we meet the good general. I can't imagine it would help our mission."

"And for the record." Wasco sounded like his humorless self. "General Lam is a lieutenant general."

That caused a round of giggles in the room.

"I think on that note we'll adjourn this meeting." Michael managed to wipe that tiny grin threatening to spread off his face. "Let's make this happen and bring our people home."

\* \* \*

Following the meeting *Eagle's* senior officers began to stream out of the observation room and Nora Laas was all set to follow them until she noticed that Tazla Star had not gotten out of her chair, instead she had decided to remain sitting and work on a padd.

For just a moment Nora was torn.

A year ago, and shortly after the Trill had come aboard, she would never even have considered what was playing on her mind now. A year ago she would have been quite happy to let events run their course especially if they could in any way or form turn out to hurt Tazla Star and her position as first officer on this ship.

Things had changed however.

So she turned away from the doors and headed back into the room and to the chair the first officer occupied. "Commander?"

The Trill looked up.

"I think there is something you should know."

"Yes?"

"I assume you are aware of Atticus West?"

She nodded. "The war correspondent from FNS."

"Well, it appears Mister West is no longer interested in reporting on the war, or the new peace for that matter. Instead he's set his sights on you."

She seemed confused. "Me?"

"He's been talking to the crew to research his latest story. And you are the centerpiece. He's calling it a redemption story but from what I can

tell he's trying to probe deep into your past to get to whatever truths he believes are hidden there."

Nora could tell that she didn't like the sound of that one bit. In fact her eyes seemed to have lost their focus as she was looking past her and into empty space. "Commander?"

It took her moment to find Nora's again. "Yes, yes of course."

"I tried my best to throw him off but I think all I did was make him more determined. I'm sorry."

Star nodded, very slowly. "I appreciate the effort, Lieutenant."

When she said nothing else, Nora continued. "Anyway, I just thought you should know. Mister West does not strike me as a man who is willing to let go easily once he has dug his teeth into something."

It was quite obvious that this news had shaken Star and Nora could only imagine what kinds of skeletons she kept in her closet which she didn't want West or anyone else for that matter to find out about. Considering the rather dubious mission she had been involved in when she had first arrived on *Eagle*, she was certain the reporter would have a field day if he discovered just a small portion of her darker past.

As far as Nora was concerned, the past was the past and Star had redeemed herself in her eyes, but West and his readers might not see it quite the same way.

Star stood. "Thank you very much for bringing this to my attention, Lieutenant, I appreciate that, I really do." The sincerity in her tone was palpable.

Nora offered a short nod in response. "On this ship, we look out for each other." She turned to leave the observation lounge, not doubting at all that she had just ruined Tazla Star's day. She no longer took any pleasure from that.

Differently to Doctor Ashely Wenera who had also left *Eagle* rather abruptly—albeit under very different circumstances months earlier—So'Dan Leva had chosen a much more low key departure.

Once they had arrived at the Gamma Seven outpost which was really not much more than a small asteroid base, perhaps half the size of *Eagle*, the senior officers had gathered in the transporter room to see the half Romulan off.

And Leva was traveling light. A carryall thrown over his shoulder seemed to contain all the belongings he cared to take with him.

"It's been an honor, sir." He reached out to shake Owens' hand

The captain accepted it with no hesitation. "All the best to you, Commander. I know that whoever is going to snatch you up can consider themselves extremely lucky to have you. You have been an inspiration and a role model to this crew and losing you won't be easy. You've become part of the family."

"I appreciate that, thank you, sir."

Star offered the man a smile as well. "I may not have known you as long as the others but I can tell you're going places, Commander. Good luck to you."

Leva gave her an appreciative nod before he regarded the other senior officers who had come to wish him well.

Owens knew that he'd already had a quiet get together with most of them the night before, he himself had stopped by, and so with all necessary goodbyes already taken care of, he didn't linger much longer and instead quickly stepped up onto the transporter platform. "Permission to leave the ship, sir."

"Permission granted, Commander." He nodded at Chief Chow operating the transporter controls.

Within moments Leva had dematerialized, gone to seek his fortunes elsewhere.

Owens didn't miss the fact that the crew he had put together four years ago was slowly beginning to break up. Gene Edison had been killed in action during the war, Ashley Wenera had left to tend to private matters

and now his tactical officer had decided to advance his career somewhere else.

It was true that he had chosen his senior officers carefully and with an eye on men and women who would see *Eagle* as more than their next assignment to get ahead in their careers. He had always wanted a group of people who would come together not unlike a real family. And for the most part he thought he had achieved this. He still considered himself lucky that most had been able and willing to stick around this long.

Deen shook her head slowly, her eyes still glued on the now empty platform. "It's not going to be the same without him around."

Hopkins felt similar. "I still can't believe he's left us so quickly. It's so sudden and unexpected."

"Things change. It's part of life and we better get used to it."

Owens shot the Bajoran security chief a sidelong glance and quickly realized that she was attempting to hide her own disappointment at Leva's departure by putting on a stern mask of pragmatism. She wasn't entirely successful.

"Sir, Gamma Seven is reporting that our guest is ready to beam onboard." Chow was wearing one of his usual and affable smiles even after the rather sad departure that had just taken place in his transporter room. There wasn't much that could dampen the Chinese man's spirit.

Owens took a quick look at all his officers still assembled around him. "Alright folks, let's break this up. We wouldn't want to intimidate our guest on his first day on board."

They didn't delay and everyone cleared the room save for Owens, Star and Nora Laas.

The captain shot the Bajoran a quizzical look. "Are you sure you want to be here for this?"

"All due respect, sir, I'm the chief of security. This is where I should be."

There was of course no arguing that point so he offered her a curt nod but also aimed a very brief and concerned look at Star which she mirrored. Nora herself seemed oblivious to her superiors' concerns.

"Go ahead, Chief."

Chow had to do little more than give Gamma Seven the green light to commence transport and a few heartbeats later another person began to materialize where the Romulan had stood only moments before.

Owens wasn't entirely sure what he had expected, all he knew was that it hadn't been the man who had appeared on the transporter platform in front of him now. Starfleet hadn't told him much more than that Gul Tevor Belore had been fully vetted and even given a low level Starfleet clearance similar to what was often awarded to civilian contractors or consultants who needed to operate on a Starfleet vessel.

Belore looked far too young to be a gul in the Cardassian military – approximately the equivalent rank of a captain in Starfleet – even if he did wear the dark uniform and turtleshell like armor which was so common among his people. Besides his curiously young age – no older than thirty, Owens guessed – he looked much as one would expect; grayish skin, large reptilian looking neck ridges and a high forehead complete with a spoon-shaped ridge at its center.

Owens had to force himself to remember that this man was no longer an enemy and truth be told it wasn't easy. After all they had fought his people for nearly two years. Three days was not nearly enough time to get used to the changed face of the galaxy. He was determined to give it his best shot however. "Gul Belore." He put on what he hoped was his friendliest smile. "Welcome aboard *Eagle*."

The man stepped down from the platform and mirrored that smile seemingly much more effortlessly and then stuck out his hand. "Thank you, Captain. It is a pleasure making your acquaintance."

He couldn't immediately tell if he was being honest or if this was just a well schooled pretense from a race which seemed to have perfected the art of putting on a smile on their face while sharpening a dagger behind their back. He shook his hand regardless. "This is my first officer Tazla Star and security chief Lieutenant Nora Laas."

"A pleasure again." He quickly proceeded to offer Star his hand as well. She hadn't been quite prepared for it and it took her a brief moment to reciprocate.

Owens couldn't help but hold his breath when he turned towards the Bajoran but to his surprise Nora didn't hesitate at all and proceeded to shake the man's hand even more promptly than the Trill had.

Belore didn't pay Nora any more attention than necessary and instead turned back to Owens. "I know exactly what you are thinking, Captain."

"Oh?"

"You're wondering how a man as young as me could already be a gul and you have your doubts that I'll be much help to you on this mission. Perhaps you are even questioning my commitment in this matter, considering that we were enemies just a few days ago."

But before Owens could try and dissuade him from his perfectly correct assumptions, Belore spoke up again. "I am of the opinion that we should get this undertaking off on the right foot, Captain, so I'll keep no secrets from you. As for your first concern, the answer to that is really quite simple; I haven't been a gul for long. In fact I was a glinn until two days ago and officially attached to the Cardassian diplomatic mission on Earth. I'm afraid on such short notice, I was the best Starfleet could do to get you a Cardassian military officer."

Owens exchanged a quick glance with Star who judging by her expression was equally surprised by the man's candor. He glanced back at the Cardassian. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

"I appreciate the sentiment, Captain, but I'm afraid I'm not quite as optimistic. You see my background is really in diplomacy and the military doesn't hold people in my field in the highest regard."

Star regarded his uniform. "But you are serving in the military now."

"I do." He nodded. "But only out of necessity." He regarded the captain again. "As for my commitment however you can be fully assured that I am highly motivated. I may be a diplomat but I'm also a patriot. The Dominion nearly wiped out my race, it'll take years, perhaps decades until we recover from this. Cardassia cannot afford a few thousands of her sons and daughters fighting on some remote rock. They're urgently needed back home where they can help to rebuild. I more than anyone want to see them come back without delay."

"I couldn't agree more," said Owens. "And the sooner we get you squared away, the sooner we can be on our way."

Nora pointed at the doors. "If you'd like to follow me, I'll show you to guest quarters."

Owens shot the woman a quick glance.

"Splendid suggestion, Lieutenant, thank you." He briefly regarded Owens again. "During the remainder of this mission I shall be at your disposal, Captain, in whatever form you may see fit." He then followed Nora out of the transporter room.

Owens watched them leave. He couldn't totally ban images out of his mind of Nora leading the Cardassian into an empty part of the ship and

strangling him with her bare hands. Then he quickly forced himself to think better of his security chief and turned towards Star. "What do you think?"

"Not what I'd call your typical Cardassian."

He nodded. "Well, who knows, maybe we're witnessing the face of the new Cardassia."

"One can only hope. But as for this mission, we better have some other ace up our sleeve. I fear that if we need to rely solely on Gul Belore to convince the Cardassians to lay down their arms, this is going to be a much longer mission than any of us would want it to be."

Owens frowned and yet it was difficult not to agree with her assessment.

\* \* \*

He had materialized in a transporter room much smaller than the one he had left behind on *Eagle* and even though only four others were present, including the transporter operator, the room already gave a cramped impression.

As Leva looked around he noticed that none of the four people in attendance seemed to be paying him much attention. He had expected somebody to greet him but it did not appear they were even aware that he was present.

That was until the transporter operator looked his way. "Uh, sorry, Commander, would you mind stepping down from there please."

It took him a moment to understand what he meant before Leva proceeded to leave the compact transporter platform. Unsure as to where to go next, he simply remained next to it.

The reason why he had been asked to step off became quickly apparent when four bright blue columns of light gave way to three more Starfleet crewmembers and a large crate of unknown cargo on an antigrav unit.

Leva remembered at least one other small vessel having approached Gamma Seven when *Eagle* had arrived and adding to two freighters already holding position nearby. He had not yet been told what his new assignment would be and so he had been naturally curious about the other

vessels, none of which had looked like a likely destination unless Starfleet was out to punish him.

The newly arrived men were quickly shown where to take their cargo and even before they had left the room another transport deposited even more crates and people. And once again there was little delay to get them on their way as well. In the meantime nobody seemed to pay Leva much thought at all.

It seemed obvious that Gamma Seven was in the middle of a large-scale cargo delivery but after the fourth team had come and gone, Leva decided he was sick of waiting and approached the man working the transporter. "Ensign, mind telling me where I'm supposed to go?"

The young man glanced up and looked at him almost as if seeing him there for the first time. It appeared he had forgotten all about him even though Leva wasn't quite sure how anyone could lose track of a half Romulan Starfleet officer in such a small transporter room. "Sorry, Commander...?"

"So'Dan Leva formerly of the starship *Eagle*. Awaiting new assignment."

"Right, right." Leva could tell the man wasn't trying to be rude or off-putting, he was simply very busy. "Yes, you have been assigned temporary guest quarters on Level D, section twelve-Baker." He looked back up after he had checked his console as if this had answered everything.

"And where would I find Level D, section twelve-Baker?"

"Uh, right." He looked around until he found somebody who could help with this. "Crewman Spencer," he said, addressing a short, red-haired enlisted man helping with the latest cargo arrival. "Please show Commander Leva to guest quarters 2-12 on Level D, section twelve-Baker."

"Right away, sir. Please follow me."

"Thank you." Leva spoke loudly enough to ensure the ensign would hear and then followed the crewman out of the room.

The theme of small and cramped continued outside. The corridors were narrow and the ceiling was low and there were far too many people on this small outpost which had clearly been designed for a much smaller crew. Spencer and Leva had to practically press themselves against the walls on at least two occasions in order to navigate the corridors.

"I guess you are being kept busy."

"Yes, sir."

"Any idea what's going on?"

"No, sir." Spencer lead him into a turbolift.

"Must be to do with the end of the war."

The man didn't make eye contact. "That would be my guess, sir."

Spencer was clearly not the talkative type and yet Leva couldn't help himself. "You wouldn't have any inkling as to what my next assignment could be?"

The crewman considered him for a moment with a blank look on his face.

"Any ships you're aware of that might be stopping by soon?"

He shook his head slightly. "Sorry, no, sir."

"Of course."

The turbolift arrived on Level D and after that it was just a short walk to the doors leading to his temporary quarters.

Leva turned back to the young enlisted man after they had arrived.

"Let me ask you something, Spencer."

"Sir?"

"How long have you been on Gamma Seven?"

"Arrived three days ago, sir."

"Straight out of basic?"

"Yes, sir."

"Figured as much." It was just his luck, he thought, that the one person he had run into knew even less than he did. "Well, thank you very much, Crewman."

"Sir." He understood that he had been dismissed and then headed back towards the turbolift.

With a sigh Leva slipped into his quarters and wasn't surprised to find it less than half the size of his quarters on *Eagle*. In fact it was perhaps as big as his washroom had been. A single bunk, a chair with a desk, a tiny porthole and a computer terminal were about all the amenities offered. A narrow door lead to what he presumed to be a closet sized shower.

He dropped off his carryall onto the chair and walked to the small round viewport and just in time to catch a glimpse of his former ship. The saucer-shaped *Nebula*-class cruiser was in the process of maneuvering away from the asteroid base and Leva continued to watch her as she rapidly accelerated away until she was just a tiny speck, indistinguishable from the endless stars which dotted the dark void of space. He felt a sudden and unfamiliar emptiness in his chest when he recognized the

quick, bright flash which indicated that *Eagle* had just jumped to warp and with that likely out of his life as well.

He turned back to take in his tiny compartment and for the first time since he had decided to leave *Eagle* he couldn't help wondering if perhaps he had made a terrible mistake.

“Thank you for seeing me. Please have a seat.” Tazla Star pointed Atticus West to the chairs facing her desk as he stepped into her office before she took a seat herself.

The tall reporter sat down opposite the Trill first officer. “I wouldn’t have dreamed of turning down such an offer.”

“You are a man easily pleased.”

“To see the famous Tazla Star in action. That’s no small thing.”

She regarded him carefully, trying to determine if he was being sarcastic but then realized that he was too good at hiding his true nature. That he had an angle, she already knew. She decided to move on for now. “I haven’t had a chance yet to properly talk to you since you arrived on board. I trust you have settled in alright and that you have been treated well?”

He nodded slightly. “I won’t complain. I’ve been on other Starfleet ships and so far this crew has been one of the least hostile to me or my profession.”

“I’m glad to hear that. We do like to accommodate our guests as much as possible.”

“In that case, I would appreciate if you could talk to the captain. I’ve been trying to schedule an interview with him for a good week now and have not heard back.” He wore a little smile as he spoke.

“The captain is a very busy man.”

“One would assume that now that the war is over, a lot less so.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“That’s all I ask,” he said. “In the meantime, how about you grant me an interview instead?” He produced a small padd from the inside of the sleeveless vest he wore. He placed it on the desk and Star noticed from the small, flashing red light on its display that it had been set to record.

She leaned forward and tapped the panel that would stop the recording. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t make a very interesting subject.”

“I’m not so sure.”

Star leaned back again. “You have a hell of a story right here on this ship, Mister West. Peace. After two years of grueling warfare you get a chance to report on what this really means to the hundreds of people who

were right in the thick of things. I can make sure that you have unparalleled access to the crew. Maybe even to the captain."

She didn't miss the little gleam in his eye and for a moment she thought he'd take the bait. "To tell you the truth, Commander, it's not a story I'm all that interested in anymore. There are only so many variations of the theme. Everyone's relieved, everyone's glad it's all over and everyone's looking forward to see family and friends again. And some are saddened at the reflection of how much has been lost. It's hardly headline grabbing news."

Star frowned. "It's reality. It's the true emotional state of this crew, maybe even of the entire Federation at this moment in time. Somebody needs to capture it."

"And I'm sure somebody will."

"I don't understand you, Mister West. I can't imagine that your readers wouldn't be interested in reading about this."

West pushed himself forward in his chair as if he was about to pass along great wisdom. "I'll let you in on a little secret of journalism, Commander. The readers don't always know what they are interested in. They don't know what they want until they hold it in their hands."

"And what is it they want, Mister West?"

"They want scandal. They want to be shocked. They don't realize it but they want somebody to bring them the buried truth. That what others are trying to keep hidden."

Star moved back to keep her distance. "Is that what they want or what you want? Perhaps you are just hoping to add a few more awards to the ones you've received after breaking that Federation Council story. When was that again? Three years ago? Four?" She had a little smirk dancing on her lips.

He easily mirrored her expression. "Commander, surely you are above such petty insults. Why don't we stop playing this little game of ours and say what's really on our mind?"

"And what would that be?"

"You haven't had the slightest inclination to meet me, or as much as exchange more than a couple of words with me, ever since I've been on board. Why all the sudden interest in my work, Commander?"

"I'm a curious sort." She offered him that kind of smile they both knew was fake.

“You found out I’m planning on writing a story about you, didn’t you?”

She shrugged. “There’s really no story to tell. Why would I be interested in that?”

His smile widened. “Oh, everything’s a story, Commander. And you are a most fascinating person. I’ve looked into it. A few years ago you were a young and rising starship captain. And then suddenly and for no apparent reason you go off the reservation, disobey direct orders and in the process get a whole lot of people killed.”

Star wanted to object right then and there but he beat her to it.

“Yes, I know, the court martial found that you were not directly responsible for any of the deaths but everybody knows that they were on your hands. Somebody pulled strings behind the scenes. You lost your rank and your command, got thrown in prison and after just a couple of years you make an astonishing comeback. Now, you tell me there’s no story there.”

Star shrugged once more. “I made a mistake. People got killed and I had to pay the price. That’s all.”

His intense eyes drilled into hers almost as if he tried to look right through her. “We both know there’s much more to it than that. Starfleet classified most of the details about your little rogue mission that led to all this. I wonder why? I get why they’d release you from the stockade temporarily when the war started to become nasty but they stuck you in the Border Service as an administrator. Hardly an essential position. And after that you become first officer on a starship that didn’t really need one, certainly not with other ships hurting for experienced officers. And let me ask you something else. Now that the war is over, will you go back to serve the rest of your sentence?”

Taza Star hoped he couldn’t tell but she was fuming inside. West had really done his homework and considering how much of her file had been classified, mostly thanks to the powerful people she had used to work for, this could not have been easy. It also meant he had firmly set his eyes on her and that story she insisted didn’t really exist. “Not while there is a stop-loss order still in effect.” It was a lame response and she knew it.

“And what happens after?”

“I don’t know.”

He nodded. "Funny, of most of the things you've said, that's about the only thing I believe. Now how about you tell me the truth about the rest of it?"

She felt her anger rising again and judging by his somewhat satisfied expression, he knew that he was getting to her. She reached for the padd and slid it across the desk until it was out of his immediate reach. "There is no truth to tell, Mister West."

He stood then. "You know what, I'm actually thankful you said that. In my line of work a certain degree of adversity makes for a much better story. It'll be just so much more satisfying once I dig out the truth myself." He headed towards the door.

Tazla Star followed suit and left her chair. "Mister West."

He turned. "Is this the part where you threaten me to let this go or else? Don't bother, your friend the security chief already tried that and if that woman couldn't intimidate me, I doubt you can. Face it, there's nothing you can do to stop this. You want to throw me into a brig? Go ahead. Journalists are known to do their best work from inside a jail cell." He was wearing a beaming grin now. "In the end though, the truth always has a tendency to come out. Oh and you can keep that." He pointed at the padd on the desk. "I've got plenty more of those." Then he turned and left.

She stared at those closed doors for a moment longer before she angrily picked up that padd with her right hand and threw it across the room with more force than she had realized. The device shattered loudly against the opposite wall before the broken pieces landed on the floor.

Sometimes she tended to forget how much strength she had in that hand thanks to the cybernetic replacement she had been fitted with after the injuries she had sustained in the very rogue mission he had alluded to. It remained a constant reminder of the sins of her past.

She let herself fall back into her chair, desperately trying to come up with a way to stop West from using it to lay waste to her future.

When he had woken up at around 0600 hours, the first thing Leva had done was to check the computer terminal in his compact room. To his disappointment it contained no messages.

Unwilling to stare at the bulkheads for the rest of the day, he took a quick shower and got dressed. He had played with the idea of going for his morning run but considering the small size of Gamma Seven, he had quickly disregarded the idea. And according to the computer terminal the facility didn't have much of a gym either.

So instead he decided to go and explore.

It was a decision he quickly came to regret. There was really nothing worth seeing on the outpost other than cramped corridors and small rooms. Worse even, he seemed to be in the way wherever he went. The back and forth movement of cargo had appeared to have continued into the night and was still in progress even in the early morning hours.

He had shortly attempted to get in touch with Gamma Seven's commanding officer or other senior personnel but apparently none had the time to spare to entertain him and he certainly didn't feel to interrupt their busy schedules.

So after less than an hour, he had already seen more of the outpost than he cared for and had returned to his quarters.

On approach he noticed a Bolian woman having stepped up to the doors leading to his cabin and using the annunciator. "Looking for me?"

The blue-skinned, bald-headed officer with a small but noticeable ridge splitting her face evenly turned around. She wore a mustard-colored operations shirt under her jacket and two full pips on her collar identified her as a lieutenant. Leva figured her to be in her mid-twenties at the most and actually quite attractive with a hint of facial makeup which brought out her hazel eyes.

"Lieutenant Commander So'Dan Leva?"

"That's me."

"I'm Lieutenant Marjorie Alendra. I'm here to escort you to the ship, sir."

"What ship?"

"The *Sacajawea*, sir." She spoke in such a manner as if it should have been a forgone conclusion.

"And for what purpose, if I may ask."

She looked downright confused now. "So that you may begin your new assignment."

"On the *Sacajawea*?"

She nodded. "Yes, sir."

"As first officer?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry I thought you knew."

Leva frowned. "Lieutenant, other than being ordered to report here for a new assignment I haven't been told anything at all."

Alendra seemed baffled. "I apologize. We were only told to expect you last night on our way here. I guess Starfleet is running a bit slow these days."

"Not your fault. And I guess you're right. Let me get my things and then we can be on our way."

She nodded curtly and watched him disappear into his quarters.

Less than a minute later he had reemerged with his carryall and the two of them were making their way towards the transporter room.

"Communications in this sector have been spotty lately," she said as they walked side by side or at least as much as they could manage considering their restricted surroundings. "It doesn't help that Starfleet has mounted a massive relief and rebuilding effort in a hurry. They're planning to erect multiple point stations over the next few weeks within what is now occupied Cardassian space. Much of the materiel is coming through here."

"That would certainly explain the rush and all the cargo." He had to awkwardly attempt to get passed a crewman pushing a packed anti-grav unit.

She nodded. "And from the looks of it Gamma Seven has not been designed to handle this much volume. But I don't think Starfleet has much choice at the moment."

He could not help but agree. "Is *Sacajawea* here to assist with the relief efforts in Cardassian space?"

"We haven't been issued orders yet."

Leva thought she appeared somewhat disappointed about this. He wasn't surprised. From the sounds of it Starfleet needed all the ships it could get its hands on if it was serious with helping the Cardassians. It

seemed somewhat odd that a perfectly fine ship which appeared available and in the right place at the right time was not being utilized. At least Leva hoped that she was perfectly fine.

They beamed over onto the *Sacajawea* with little delay. Leva found the transporter room of fairly standard design. Larger than the one they had departed from but smaller than what he was used to on *Eagle*. It occurred to him then that he knew next to nothing about this ship. The name sounded familiar but he couldn't immediately recall where he had heard it before. Had he been given a heads-up, he would have spent the last few days learning everything he could about his new assignment. As that had not been possible, he would have to play catch-up now. "Tell me about *Sacajawea*, Lieutenant." They stepped out of the transporter room.

He had expected her to light up a little when speaking about her ship but he could find no such excitement in her features or even her tone. "She's a refitted *New Orleans*-class frigate. Sixteen years old. We currently have a crew of two hundred and five, including eighteen officers. Captain Evan Mahoney is in command. He's been the commanding officer for about eighteen months or so. I'm the operations officer and have been on board for twelve. I've also filled in as the acting first officer for the last three months."

Leva took all this in. She wasn't nearly as large as *Eagle* but still a decent little ship and ideal to gain experience as an XO. It also didn't surprise him that she carried so few officers. It was a sign of the times. During war it was far easier to man ships with inexperienced enlisted men who could be rushed through basic training rather than with officers who at average spent four years at the Academy before being ready to be deployed. In the same vein it wasn't unusual for the few available officers to fill more than one position like Alendra had done.

They stepped into the turbolift and she asked for the bridge.

"What can you tell me about Captain Mahoney?"

She hesitated answering that question, clearly not entirely comfortable with it. "To be honest, sir, I think it may be better if you make up your own mind about the captain. We're heading for his ready room now."

That had not been a response Leva had expected from a member of the crew.

They arrived on the bridge and at first glance Leva found it compact but functional with all the stations one would expect. The center featured

only a single chair, for the captain, instead of the arrangement of multiple seats on *Eagle's* bridge. For Leva this likely meant he'd have to do a lot of standing. He didn't mind, he was used to it from his time as a tactical officer.

Alendra walked him to within a few steps of a set of crimson doors and then stopped and pointed. "That's the ready room. The captain's inside."

"You're not coming?"

She shook her head. "I don't think that will be necessary."

"Very well then." But before he could head out, she spoke up again.

"Oh, and sir, welcome aboard."

He responded with a curt nod and noted the all too obvious relief in her eyes. He would have expected a little bit more reticence from the officer he had come to replace. But then again Alendra seemed young and perhaps quite happy to unload a burden she'd been asked to carry much too soon and probably looked forward to being able to return to her regular duties.

She promptly turned and left, leaving Leva to approach the ready room.

After using the annunciator, a disembodied voice allowed him entry.

Inside he found that the lighting had been dimmed significantly compared to the rest of the ship. The office wasn't much larger than to allow enough space for a desk, three chairs and an old-fashioned wooden cabinet standing in a corner. A small privacy alcove hinted at a secluded area to one side.

Behind the desk sat Mahoney who was partially obstructed by the shadows created by the low light levels. Only when he leaned forward a bit was Leva able to fully see the man. He appeared to be in his mid-thirties, usually young for a starship captain but likely another sign of the times. He wore his hair buzz cut short along with a neat goatee which framed his slim mouth. His eyes seemed sunken and dark, especially in the low light conditions.

"Commander Leva, please come in, come in. It's good of you to finally arrive."

"Thank you, sir, it's good to be here."

Mahoney uttered a little laugh and then reached for a glass on his table which contained an amber-colored liquid. He waved him closer with the other. "Please, sit down, let me have a look at you."

He did as requested.

Mahoney took a swig from his wide glass, nearly emptying it. "Vulcan?"

Many people had made this mistake thanks to his pointed ears and underdeveloped forehead ridges. "Part Romulan. My father was human."

He nodded. "Yes, you don't sound Vulcan. You must have had a tough time with that kind of heritage."

It was not a subject he liked to dwell on. "I've had my share of challenges."

Mahoney seemed to understand and moved on. "Well, I'm certainly glad you decided to join us. A little surprised perhaps but glad nevertheless. Poor Marjorie has been doing her best but she lacks experience. Hell, she was just a jay-gee up until five months ago."

"May I ask why you are surprised that I'm here, sir?"

He took his time to answer that question and then shrugged. "We've lost a lot of people during the war and I've been asking for new personnel for months now. All they've ever sent me are ratings too young to shave and a handful of ensigns who wouldn't know the stern from the bow." He emptied his glass. "Myself, Marjorie and the good doctor are about the only officers on this ship with any kind of experience. A man with your record is desperately needed."

"I understand."

Mahoney reached for a bottle of whiskey on his desk but when he tried to pour some of it into his glass he found it to be empty. He stood and walked to the small corner cabinet and opened it. Inside Leva could spot at least half a dozen full bottles. Clearly Mahoney preferred his alcohol strong and non-replicated. "To be frank, the other reason I'm surprised, Commander, is that you would accept a position on this ship in first place." He removed another bottle.

"Starfleet did not advise me of the ship I was to be assigned to when they made the offer."

That caused Mahoney to throw back his head and laugh again but Leva had a hard time figuring out if it was born out of genuine amusement. "I'm sorry, Commander but this is just so typically Starfleet." He walked back behind his desk. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that they'd pull a stunt like that." Mahoney poured himself another. "If they had told you what ship they wanted to send you to, I'm sure you would have thought twice about this transfer."

“Why do you say that, sir?”

“Because this ship is a career killer, Commander.” He took a sip from his refilled glass. Then he leaned forward and over his desk a little bit, causing Leva to smell the whiskey on his breath. “We haven’t exactly distinguished ourselves during the war. Oh yes, we’ve bled for Starfleet but we haven’t really made much of a difference. And over the last few months we weren’t even good enough to take part in combat. Instead they had us running milk runs far removed from any kind of real danger. Mark my words, the powers that be want *Sacajawea* cast aside. Mothballed, maybe even scrapped for good.” He leaned back in his chair again, looking off into space for a moment. “I know they want me gone.”

Leva refused to join Mahoney’s dejected mood. “With the heavy losses during the war, Starfleet will need every ship available. The reconstruction efforts in Cardassian space alone will require massive resources.”

“I like your optimism, Commander.” Even though Mahoney seemingly didn’t agree with any of it.

“Sir, they could have transferred me onto any ship in the fleet. They chose this one when they could have left matters well enough alone.”

Mahoney shrugged, obviously not willing to have his views on this subject changed or accept any theory which didn’t easily fit into his own. “Far be it from me to try and discourage my new first officer on his first day on the job.” His smile looked forced. “Regardless what the future holds for me and this ship, we’ll carry on like good little Starfleet officers, won’t we?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Glad to hear it,” he said. “I guess you better go and get to know your new ship. I’m sure Marjorie has plenty of work she cannot wait to unload onto you.”

It was clear he was being dismissed so Leva stood. “Understood, sir. I’d be happy to get started. And again, I’m glad to be here.”

“We’ll see.”

With that Leva left the ready room. Once outside he took a moment to consider Mahoney and all that he had said. He hadn’t expected his new commanding officer to be so different to Michael Owens, so seemingly dejected and uninspired and with what appeared to be little to no pride left for his ship or his crew. Even during their darkest days, Owens and the

people under his command had never displayed such a level of apathy as Mahoney seemed to have surrendered himself to.

But Leva refused to adopt such an attitude or feel sorry for himself for having abandoned a ship where he had come to take a certain degree of self-respect for granted. Instead he decided to see *Sacajawea* as a challenge. He was determined to do whatever was in his power to see the fortunes of this ship and crew turned into something everyone on board could be proud of once again.

## PART II

### THE NEVER-ENDING WAR

#### 1

Michael Owens stepped onto the bridge and noticed his first officer already sitting in her usual chair, next to his, seemingly studying a computer console. He took his seat and leaned over to her. "Commander?"

She didn't even react.

"Commander?" He tried again, this time a little more forcefully and loud enough to cause Deen at operations to glance back at them curiously.

The Trill looked his way and then when she had apparently realized that he had addressed her, blushed ever so slightly. "Sorry, sir, million miles away."

He frowned. "You've seemed distracted over the last few days. Anything I should be concerned about?"

She quickly shook her head. "No, nothing. I'm fine. Honestly."

He wasn't convinced. It hadn't been that long ago that Michael had finally managed to convince himself to let her off the proverbial leash and to begin to show her more trust than what he had been able to afford her after she had first come aboard. And even though she had been on the ship for over a year now, he knew their relationship was still not as strong as the one he'd shared with her predecessor. It wasn't at the level he was entirely comfortable with. Perhaps he had been spoiled by Edison, but he wanted his first officer to be an extension of himself, especially when it came to dealing with the crew. Sometimes he wasn't quite sure if the reason they hadn't managed to establish that kind of rapport yet was because he was unwilling to go the extra mile or if it was Star who refused to go it with him.

However there was no doubt that she had worked hard over the last twelve months, maybe harder than anyone else on this ship and that she had earned the right to be a member of this crew despite whatever sins she had committed in her past. She had redeemed herself in his eyes and he

certainly wasn't going to disregard her splendid track record on *Eagle* because of a couple of days she'd been less focused than usual.

"Are you sure? I'm still waiting for that intelligence report you promised me." Since Star had once worked for Starfleet Intelligence – albeit a rather shady part of the organization from what Owens understood – and still had a few contacts within SI, she had become his unofficial intelligence officer, often able to provide pertinent information faster and more reliably than if relying on official channels.

Tazla Star was not a woman easily rattled and yet she looked downright embarrassed at her oversight. "I'm sorry, I've got it right here." She picked up a padd and then worked her console to transfer the data before handing it over to the captain.

Owens scanned the content but couldn't find anything particularly interesting. "What are the highlights?"

"We don't have much on the Cardassians," she said. "Starfleet believes that a Gul Metral has been left in charge of the military contingent after the Jem'Hadar and the Vorta pulled out. Their troop strength is estimated at around one hundred thousand Cardassian soldiers, similar to the number of Starfleet Marines stationed there."

Owens scrolled through the report until he found the sparse details it contained on the Cardassian officer in command. "What do we know about Metral?"

She shook her head. "Not much. He's a career military man from a wealthy family on Cardassia Prime. He's been serving in the Twelfth Order pretty much all his adult life and made a name for himself during the Klingon-Cardassian War."

"Was our guest able to shed some more light on him?"

"Can't say that he has. Belore has never met the man and only knows him by reputation which is not particularly noteworthy."

Owens wasn't surprised, by his own admission, Tevor Belore was not likely to have traveled in the same circles as Gul Metral. Perhaps Belore's concerns that he wasn't going to be very useful on this mission were appropriate after all.

"Now I did dig up quite a bit on General Lam."

"Oh?"

"For one thing I was able to find out the answer to the question as to why Starfleet would continue to invest manpower and resources to fighting a ground war on a planet with seemingly little strategic value. It

seems it's mostly thanks to Lam himself who has been able to convince Command over and over again that giving up on Valeria would be a grave mistake. And the man seems to have enough clout with the powers that be to have had his way. The general has some very important and influential friends back on Earth including a relative who works within the administration. Among senior officials the Valeria campaign has gained the nickname Lam's War."

Owens did not like the sound of that. He turned to look at DeMara Deen who had been listening in. "What's so important about Valeria to dedicate so many men and resources to it? What do we know about the planet?"

Deen was prepared. "Valeria is a class-M planet in a binary star system with a mostly temperate to tropical climate. It's a warp civilization with a grade six on the industrial scale which places it roughly a century behind current Federation technology levels. The planet is sparsely populated and is not a major supplier of resources. However the Valerians are very active and important in the interstellar trading community in this sector, trading with both the Cardassians and the Federation. They have attempted to remain neutral with both."

He looked back at Star who nodded in agreement with Deen's report. "The Valerians signed a non-aggression pact with the Dominion before the war broke out. When it did, its location close to Cardassian and Federation space made it a possible invasion route into Federation space but after just a few months the war moved elsewhere and Valeria was mostly left alone."

"Except for Lam and Gul Metral," said Owens. "So have they been fighting their own private little war all this time?"

She nodded. "I believe so. Certainly since the Dominion pulled out and both sides stopped actively supporting the Valeria campaign."

"That's just great."

The doors to the forward turbolift opened to allow Doctor Elijah Katanga to step onto the bridge. Michael doubted that it was a mere social visit. Katanga had made it very clear ever since coming onboard that he wanted to play a much greater role on *Eagle* than Doctor Wenera had ever done and the captain had gotten used to Katanga spending some of his time on the bridge. And on occasion he even welcomed the input of the most veteran officer serving on his ship. Of course there were equal amounts of occasions when he wished he could keep his observations to

himself. Michael had found it difficult to tell one of Starfleet's living legends to shut up. Not that he thought it would do much good.

"Doctor." He offered him a nod as he made himself comfortable in the chair to his left. "What brings you up here?"

"We're about to arrive at Valeria and I'd like to be here when we get to break the good news." He had a smirk on his face.

Katanga had the uncanny ability to show up on the bridge just before something important was about to happen. Owens had come to think of him as an omen. And not always of good news.

Culsten spoke up from the helm. "Captain, we are approaching the Valeria system."

Owens exchanged a quick look with Star, once again surprised how well Katanga had been able to set his clock to match up with ship events. Then he stood. "Slow to impulse once we enter the system and set a course for Valeria Prime." He glanced back at Star. "Please ask Mister Belore and Major Wasco to join us on the bridge. With any luck we'll be able to resolve this mission in just a few minutes."

Her response was not an expression of optimism and learning everything she had told him, he could hardly blame her.

"Dee, what's happening around the planet?"

She promptly consulted her board. "Very little. But I'm detecting a number of defense satellites in orbit. Both of Federation and Cardassian design."

Star nodded after she had summoned the two men to the bridge. "That's all that's left. Starfleet as well as the Dominion took all ships and most orbital facilities with them when they pulled out."

"They didn't pull out everything, obviously." Katanga sported a frown now. "What insanity to fight over something nobody really wants."

"It's war, Doctor." Owens spoke without looking at the man. "Most of it tends to be rather insane."

"Well, the war is over," he shot back. "Time for those kids to get with the program."

"Couldn't agree more." Owens looked back towards Deen. "Do the satellites pose any danger to us?"

"The Cardassian ones would be if we were to stray too close. Friend-or-foe detection on ours has already kicked in and we are not being targeted by those."

He nodded and glanced towards tactical and for a moment expecting So'Dan Leva to stand watch there. Then he quickly remembered that the Romulan had left the ship and in his stead he found Junior Lieutenant Trinik manning that post. A final decision about Leva's permanent replacement had not yet been made but for now the Vulcan was the next highest ranking tactical officer and it made sense that he would step up to fill that position. "Mister Trinik, are we able to hail the planet from here?"

"Negative. Sensors are detecting significant interference emanating from the planet's surface. I am not certain we will be able to open reliable communications at all."

"How are we going to break the good news if we can't even talk to them?" Deen looked at the doctor who quickly nodded, recognizing the dilemma.

Just then the turbolift deposited their Cardassian guest along with science officer Xylion and Major Wasco onto the bridge.

Owens regarded Xylion first. "Commander, we're having some trouble communicating with the planet's surface. See what you can do, please."

He offered a curt nod while he headed towards the Science I station at the aft part of the bridge. "I have already expected this complication. A ground war of this magnitude is likely to depend heavily on communications and transporter jammers in order to achieve a tactical advantage over the enemy." He took his seat and began to work. "I have formulated a number of theories as how we may be able to circumvent scattering fields blocking our communication attempts."

Katanga rolled his eyes. "Sure, let's fight a horrible ground battle and while we're at it let's take away all means to talk to each other. I'm starting to like this place less and less."

"Now entering standard orbit around Valeria." Culsten was experienced enough to know that this would have been the captain's next order and had taken the initiative. "I'm keeping us well away from those nasty little Cardassian weapon platforms."

Owens nodded and regarded the screen where the large green and blue orb filled out most of the space now. At first glance the planet reminded him a little bit of Earth. Upon closer inspection however it was clear this world was smaller, with fewer landmasses and heavier cloud cover. From about six hundred fifty miles from the surface the planet

seemed peaceful with no indication at all that a terrible ground war had ravaged this world for nearly two years.

The captain looked at his two guests who had joined him in the command area at the center of the bridge, finding both men appearing fairly confident even if Belore had already warned him of his perceived low chances of success. Of course that wouldn't stop Owens from trying.

Wasco with his strong and square jaw looked as stone-faced as ever. Owens couldn't quite shake the feeling however that he was trying to keep his distance from the Cardassian. No surprise considering the Marine had fought his kind up until a week ago. "Gentlemen, as soon as we are able to open communications you're up. I'll speak with General Lam myself but I think it be best if you stay close Major and jump in if you feel it necessary."

He nodded curtly in response.

He glanced at Belore. "As for Gul Metral, it may be best if you address him yourself."

"Certainly, Captain."

"Sir." The science officer turned from his console. "I've been able to boost our communications grid to make contact with the Cardassian network and we should be able to open a channel. It might not be very reliable but it should be stable enough to allow for a two-way audio/visual signal for up to three minutes."

Star shot the Vulcan a quizzical look. "How about our side?"

"The Marines are employing a more sophisticated jamming system and it will take longer to attempt to circumvent it." Xylion focused back on his station, no doubt in order to work on a way to open a channel to the Federation presence on Valeria.

Katanga's frown seemed to be edged onto his face now. "You'd think our people would make it easier for us to talk to them."

Owens felt similar but decided not to wait. "Very well, we'll start with Metral in the meantime." He glanced at Trinik. "Lieutenant, hail them and advise that we have a Cardassian military representative onboard who needs to urgently speak with Gul Metral."

The tactical officer nodded and tended to his controls.

Owens glanced at Belore. "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I suppose."

They had to wait nearly five minutes for a response and when Metral finally appeared on the view screen, the channel was heavily distorted and flickering as if it was about to collapse at any moment.

Belore took a step towards the screen regardless. "Greetings Gul Metral. I am Gul Belore and I have come to advise you that the war between the Federation and the Dominion has formally ended. A treaty has been signed three days ago and hostilities have come to a close."

The man on the screen didn't seem to respond to this, he hardly even moved.

"Metral, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you." His voice came across as distorted as his image. "Who did you say you are?"

"Gul Tevor Belore, assigned to the Ninth Order. What's left of it."

"I've never heard of you before."

Belore nodded. "As you can imagine, Cardassia is in turmoil at the moment. We have suffered heavy losses. Regretfully I was the only military officer available at short notice to come here. I've only been a gul for a brief time. But that doesn't change the situation. The war is over and we're here to make sure the fighting on Valeria comes to an end accordingly."

"That's just like the Dominion." Metral practically spat as he spoke, showing little love for his former allies. "They pull out of here with all their men and equipment, telling me to keep fighting but haven't sent me a shred of support since. If the war really is over, I wouldn't be surprised if we were the last to be told about it."

Owens exchanged a quick and encouraging look with Star. Metral seemed to be willing to listen.

On screen the channel flickered out completely for half a second before coming back on.

Xylion glanced towards the captain. "We are likely to lose this signal shortly."

Belore understood. "Gul, we are having trouble keeping this channel open. If you could disable your comm jammers, we might be able to discuss this over a more stable connection."

But Metral seemed to be concerned by something else altogether. "You have arrived here on a Federation starship? What does this mean? Have we lost the war?"

Belore didn't respond straight away but glanced at Owens instead, not entirely sure apparently how to breach that particular subject. The captain prompted him to continue. "The Dominion forces have surrendered to the Federation following a siege of Cardassia Prime."

Metral leaned back in his chair, and taking far too much time to take in this information, considering the unstable connection. *"You are putting me into a difficult position here, you understand this, don't you? I've never even heard your name before today and you come here on a Starfleet ship telling me the war is over and that we have surrendered to the Federation. I suppose next you'll tell me to surrender myself to Lam. How do I know this is true? How do I know you're not part of Damar's Rebellion I've heard about?"*

It was a good point, Owens had to admit. Gul Damar, the former leader of the Cardassian Union had indeed rebelled against the Dominion and had even received Federation support for his efforts. The Dominion and the new Cardassian leadership had naturally spun Damar's action into a rebellion against Cardassia itself and the uprising had initially failed. Metral probably hadn't learned of that outcome yet or of any of the other events which had transpired after, including the Dominion's harsh retribution against Cardassia and its eventual surrender.

"We have copies of the official records we'll be able to transmit to you. But I'm not asking you to surrender. All we want is a ceasefire until you are able to verify what we have said."

Owens was pleasantly surprised at Belore's approach and remembered that he had claimed to have been a diplomat before being drafted into the military.

*"What's Lam got to say about all this?"*

Owens stepped forward. "We have not yet been able to contact General Lam but we expect to do so shortly. He has no reason to mistrust us and I would expect he would agree to an immediate ceasefire as well."

Metral uttered a short little laugh. *"Clearly you don't know Lam."* He continued before Belore or Owens could respond. *"I might be willing to entertain the notion of a ceasefire if Lam agrees. But until then I shall not move a single man from the front lines. I will not take that kind of risk. Contact me again when –"* The channel cut out for good and Metral was gone, once again replaced by the image of the slowly spinning planet.

Deen offered a little nod. "That went better than I would have expected."

"Contrary to what you might have heard, Lieutenant," said Belore. "Cardassians can be reasonable people."

"All we need to do now is get Lam to agree to the ceasefire and half our job here is done." Owens found his science officer again. "Commander?"

"I have found a way to communicate with the Federation embassy on Valeria which functions as General Lam's headquarters."

The captain gave Trinik the go ahead.

Within a few moments a middle-aged man, apparently thin and with short white hair appeared on the screen. He seemed to be standing in an office of sorts and while the image was just as bad as it had been with Metral, it was just good enough to make out his uniform and rank insignia. It was without doubt General Lam.

"Greetings General. I'm Captain Michael Owens of the starship *Eagle*. We have been dispatched to deliver good news. The war is over. The Dominion has surrendered." A smile decorated his lips. He was never going to get tired saying this.

"*Captain Owens.*" Lam spoke slowly, almost methodically. "*Welcome to Valeria. The Dominion has surrendered, you say?*"

Owens had expected Lam to be relieved, or at the very least surprised by the news. Neither seemed to be the case. "Yes, sir. A treaty has been signed."

Lam seemed to recognize the man standing next to Owens. "*Cesar? Cesar Wasco?*"

Michael was almost amazed to see the major smile for once. "Yes, sir, it's me."

"*My God, how long has it been?*"

"*Eight years, sir.*"

Lam nodded slowly. "*Far too long.*"

"*It has. We've come to bring you and your men home, sir.*"

"*Yes, of course.*" Lam glanced towards Owens again. "*Captain, would you do me the honor of joining me on the surface so that we may discuss this situation. And Major, I would be delighted if you could join us as well.*"

Owens nodded. "We shall beam down shortly, General."

"*Splendid. I'll have precise coordinates and instructions sent to you immediately. With all these overlapping scattering fields in effect, transporters can be a little tricky on Valeria and I suggest you follow the instructions closely. I'm looking forward to seeing you both. Lam out.*"

And with that he disappeared as well.

Owens turned to his crew. "Thoughts?"

Katanga was unsurprisingly the first one to offer his opinion. "The fella didn't look as relieved as I would have been when getting these kind of news."

Wasco shot the doctor a hard look. "General Lam is a highly experienced Marine who has been around for a very long time. He's also one of the most stolid people I've ever met. However that does not mean that he would not feel immensely relieved to hear of the end of the war. For the sake of his own men at the very least."

"I've been around for longer and witnessed more than my fair share of tragic events. Trust me I took those news a lot less gracefully."

Star stood from her chair. "After serving on the front lines for as long as he has, he may have become somewhat jaded. Perhaps he is a little less willing to believe anything he hears at face value. No matter how good it may sound."

Owens nodded. "Agreed. We'll go down there and let him know that this isn't a mere gift horse." He regarded the Cardassian. "Mister Belore, I think you should join us as well. Your presence might help convince the general that this war is truly over."

"Whatever I can do to help."

He pointed at Deen next who understood and she left her station. He turned to his first officer last. "Commander, mind the store while we're gone."

"Sir, I'd much rather you let me go down there instead to brief the general."

But Owens shook his head. "Lam is expecting me. Besides, these are the kind of news I like to deliver in person." He was already heading towards the turbolift with Belore, Wasco and Deen following closely, his mind fully made up on the issue.

Only a few hours after Leva had joined *Sacajawea* as first officer had they received their new orders. Mahoney had left it to him to organize a mission briefing to get the senior officers up to speed. It was not how Owens had liked to run things back on *Eagle* but Leva didn't mind the extra responsibility.

Of course senior officers was a bit of a misleading term on *Sacajawea*. Besides him, Mahoney, Alendra and the ship's doctor, no officer had served in Starfleet for longer than three years and as the captain had pointed out, most of the officer corps was made up out of ensigns who had been cadets in training just a short while ago.

Leva had gotten to work straight away after meeting with Mahoney, getting together with Alendra who was indeed quite happy to fill him in on whatever he needed to know and pass on her temporary duties as executive officer. He had found that she had done a decent job at keeping the ship running and her file made it clear that she had done so being surprisingly versatile, filling in from time to time wherever she needed to, be that in engineering or at tactical and even at the helm.

But the tactical and security position remained the only one which had not yet been filled with a permanent officer ever since the previous person holding that position had been killed in action months earlier. As security and tactical were his specialty and seeing that there wasn't anyone else on board who even came close to his qualifications, he had decided to take a page out of Alendra's book and moonlight in that role himself while at the same time trying to find a promising ensign or non-commissioned officer he could tutor to eventually take over the position full time.

The only other officer with any kind of significant experience on the ship was a junior lieutenant called Preston Hendricks who had become the chief engineer only a few weeks ago. Judging by his personnel file, the young man was no genius but at least he had served on the ship for his entire, even if short, career and was familiar enough with the engines to keep things running efficiently.

Hendricks and Alendra had already assembled in *Sacajawea's* compact briefing room along with chief medical officer Doctor Alan Newheiser when Leva arrived

Newheiser was going on middle age, was tall, almost skeletal with dark, spiked short hair and restless eyes. He didn't exactly fill Leva with the greatest amount of confidence.

"Ah, Commander, it is such a pleasure to finally meet you." He quickly offered his hand after the first officer had entered

Leva shook it. "My pleasure, Doctor."

"I'm curious, how do you find our little ship, Commander?"

Newheiser's voice carried, almost as if he wasn't just speaking to Leva but giving a speech in front of a large crowd. There really wasn't much point to this considering the rather small size of the briefing room. He did notice however that Hendricks and Alendra were paying close attention to their conversation.

"I see a lot potential here."

"Potential, eh?" Newheiser said. "That's quite a nice way of putting things."

Mahoney stepped into the briefing room and walked right to his chair at the head of the table without acknowledging anyone present.

The doctor didn't take any notice of the captain either. "Well, I for one am rooting for you, Commander. It strikes me you might be one of the most capable officers we ever had the pleasure of welcoming on this ship." Newheiser shot a very brief glance towards Mahoney.

If the captain was bothered by this dig seemingly directed at him, he didn't show it.

Leva merely responded with a nod.

"I hear we have a new mission." The doctor focused back on Leva as he took his seat. "Tell us all about it."

Leva followed suit, positioning himself to the right of Mahoney and then looked at the captain, not feeling comfortable to speak out of turn yet.

But Mahoney was clearly quite happy to let his first officer take the initiative. "By all means, Commander, go ahead and share the details of our glorious mission with our valiant crew."

"Right." Leva turned to regard the three officers at the table. "As you may be aware, communications in this sector have been rather spotty since we have lost more than half of the subspace relay stations thanks to Dominion forces using them for target practice during the war. We took aboard twenty-eight new subspace beacons at Gamma Seven and our mission is to deploy them across the sector as a temporary solution to ensure full comm traffic in this area of space is restored."

Hendricks and Alendra were nodding slowly along while Newheiser's intense eyes just stayed glued on the first officer, a tiny smile on his thin lips.

"Mister Hendricks, your job will be to prepare the individual beacon modules for deployment. Lieutenant Alendra, we'll need you to work with the helm to map the most efficient deployment pattern across the sector." He waited a moment until both officers had acknowledged. "Any questions?"

Only Newheiser spoke up. "Sounds all very straight forward, Commander."

He nodded.

"Yes, very straight forward." Mahoney spoke without regarding any of his officers. "And a job a damn buoy tender could be doing instead." He stood suddenly. "Commander, finish up in here, will you?" And with that he quickly departed.

Leva had not expected the captain to leave so abruptly. He was right of course, it wasn't exactly a glamorous assignment but he couldn't suppress a frown at Mahoney voicing his displeasures so openly in front of the crew. When he glanced back at the others he noticed that nobody had seemed particularly surprised or rattled by the captain's sudden departure. "Well, let's get to work, shall we?"

Everyone left their chairs.

Newheiser lingered behind even after the others had left and then regarded the first officer. "Welcome aboard, Commander." He offered that same smirk again. "And from the looks of things you've got your work cut out for you."

Leva couldn't disagree.

Michael Owens was not surprised to find Nora Laas waiting for him when he stepped out of the turbolift.

“Sir, permission to join the away team.”

He shook his head and walked right passed her. “Not this time.”

Of course the security chief was not so easily shaken and she quickly fell into step beside him. “Captain, I really think you should reconsider and let me come with you. Besides, I used to be a Marine, I know exactly how they think. I could be very valuable to you.”

“I think the major has that aspect of the mission covered, Lieutenant.” He shot her a cursory glance but didn’t slow. “He also has a personal relationship with the general, he served directly under him for a few years. In fact Lam is looking forward to reunite with him.”

She nodded as she had to concede that point. “Alright but you shouldn’t be leaving the ship without a security escort. It’s regulations.”

Owens stopped in front of the doors leading to the transporter room and then turned to regard the Bajoran, understanding that she had to be pretty desperate to quote regulations to him. “Lieutenant, we’re beaming down to a Starfleet Marines command post. We’re bound to be surrounded by dozens of armed troops.” He glanced over at Wasco who had followed him along with Deen and Belore.

Wasco nodded. “Hundreds.” The Marine regarded the still dissatisfied Bajoran. “You have my word, from one Marine to another, the captain will be perfectly safe. I’ll make sure of it personally.”

It should have put her mind at ease but it clearly didn’t and Owens knew perfectly well why. She took her job of protecting him extremely seriously and while she must have known, intellectually at least, that he was reasonably safe in the care of the Marines, letting somebody else but her handle his security simply didn’t sit well.

Then she shot a quick glance at the Cardassian who was to accompany the captain, unable to entirely mask her suspicions.

Owens noticed. “I’ll be fine, Laas.”

“I’ll keep a security team on standby in the transporter room just in case it’ll be needed.”

"It won't." Wasco was unable to hide the slightest hint of a smile playing on his lips, clearly somewhat amused by Nora's insistence.

"You do that, Lieutenant but I think the major's right." Owens left the flustered security chief alone in the corridor while he and the others stepped into the transporter room.

"What did I tell you about tempting fate like this?" Deen whispered into Owens' ear as they took their positions on the transporter platform.

Gul Belore joined the others. "I admire her tenacity. It is almost Cardassian."

Deen looked mortified. "Oh dear, don't ever let her hear you talk like this."

Belore offered her a smirk. "I can see in her eyes that she's a warrior. Trust me I've known Bajorans like her and I have no intention of making them my enemy. Not if I have a choice in the matter."

Owens looked at the transporter operator. "Chief, are we ready to go?"

Chow nodded in response. "We've received the coordinates and Valeria has temporarily deactivated their transporter scramblers, allowing for a beam-in window. Albeit a very small one. The local forecast is seventeen degrees centigrade with a one hundred percent chance of precipitation."

Owens looked at his away team. "We didn't pack for rain." He shrugged and looked at Chow. "Oh well, I'm sure we'll cope. Energize, Chief."

The transporter process felt a spell longer than usual, likely a precaution considering the many scramblers on the surface which could interfere with the beam-in. Chow probably wanted to make absolutely sure they would re-materialize on the surface and have the ability to abort and bring them back onto *Eagle* if anything went wrong.

As far as Michael could tell nothing did. Instead he and his three companions materialized as expected on the surface of Valeria. However, perhaps not exactly in a location he had expected.

The first hint was the sensation of rain falling onto his head. They had not been transported into a building but into the middle of a large open area outside. And as Chief Chow had advised, a steady drizzle rained down on them from the gray skies above.

Looking around Owens couldn't see anybody at first. Then he spotted a few heavily-armed Marines emerging from behind what looked

like fortified barricades. Within moments the away team was surrounded by dark-clad Marines, their rifles held at the ready, approaching the away team from all sides.

"I guess you wish you'd taken up Nora's offer now." Deen spoke quietly at his side as she watched the Marines getting closer.

But soon enough the lead man lowered his weapon and indicated for the rest of his men to do the same.

"There is no cause for concern." Wasco raised his hands carefully, showing the other Marines that he was not armed. "This is standard battlefield procedure when securing a landing zone."

Deen shot him a worried glance as she raised her own arms. "We're on a battlefield?"

He shook his head. "Doubtful. But better safe than sorry."

"We've got a Cardie!" One of the Marines shouted and just like that the dozen men around the away team sprung back to high alert, bringing up their rifles but this time aiming them at Gul Belore.

Owens quickly took a step forward, raising his hands. "It's alright, he's with us and poses no danger. None of us are armed."

"Show us your hands. Do it now!" The lead Marine was clearly not easily calmed as he kept his sharp gaze on Belore, watching his every move.

The captain turned to the Cardassian. "I suggest you do as he says."

Belore nodded quickly and then raised his hands, making it quite obvious that he was wearing no weapons to speak of.

It wasn't quite enough for the overcautious Marines and two of them very slowly and methodically approached Belore. While the others kept their rifles trained on him, the two approaching Marines swung their weapons over their shoulders and pulled out combat tricorders, meticulously scanning the gul from head to toe. And even that wasn't entirely sufficient as one of them stepped all the way up to him.

"Do not move." The female Marine put away her tricorder and then began to roughly pat down Belore, paying particular attention to his large, clamshell like armor which could possibly have hidden weapons or explosives.

"This really isn't necessary." And yet Belore endured the woman's probing hands.

"Shut up, spoon-head."

Wasco took a step forward. "Check the attitude, Corporal."

She looked up at Wasco, quickly recognizing his rank. “Sorry, Major, just doing my job.”

He nodded. “I understand that but this is a foreign dignitary under Starfleet protection. You will treat him with the respect he deserves.”

“Yes, sir.” She sounded at least slightly chastised and then rejoined the rest of her team. “He’s clean.”

“Not quite the friendliest welcome we’ve received.” Deen kept her voice low.

Owens didn’t disagree but could understand their caution. “These people have been serving on this world for nearly two years, fighting the Dominion and the Cardassians with little interruption. Given the circumstances their disposition shouldn’t come as much of a surprise.”

She nodded. “Should make them all the more happy to be able to finally come home.”

The Marines had now lowered their weapons and the highest-ranking NCO, a gruff looking Andorian sergeant, stepped forward. “We’ll escort you to the command post. Please follow me.” He turned and headed off without waiting for a response.

Owens and Deen exchanged looks but then quickly followed the man along with Wasco and Belore while the rest of the Marines took up positions at their flanks and the rear, keeping the away team securely cocooned within their formation.

Deen stayed close to the captain. She curiously considered her escort—none of which were making even the briefest eye contact with the away team—before turning to Owens once more. “Why am I getting the feeling we are being marched to our own execution?”

Leva had never given his meal arrangements a great deal of thought on *Eagle*. Usually he simply ended up eating with Nora Laas or other officers in the Nest. On a few occasions he would even sit with the captain or the first officer.

He had already learned that Mahoney preferred to eat alone in his quarters and rarely if ever ventured out into the ship's lounge. When Leva arrived there and after collecting his dinner from the replicator he found a room mostly filled with young enlisted men and a handful of ensigns. And none of them even tried to make eye contact with their first officer. Sure they stole a glance here and there, but this seemed to be mostly out of curiosity. Judging how quickly they turned away again, none of them wanted the half-Romulan sitting at their table.

Leva wasn't sure if this was because they had an issue with his heritage, if they were naturally cautious about outsiders or if they were intimidated by having to strike up a conversation with a senior officer.

In the end he settled on an empty table by the corner to consume his meal. Thankfully he didn't have to wait too long for some company when he spotted Alendra entering the lounge. After she had fetched her own dinner, Leva indicated for her to join him. She did so with little hesitation.

"Sir." She took the chair opposite him.

"How are you doing, Lieutenant?"

She seemed somewhat surprised by that question, as if it was not one she was used to answering. "Well, thank you, sir."

"We're off-duty. You can drop the *sir*."

She nodded.

"What do you have there?" He didn't recognize the dark brown dish she had placed on the table in front of her.

"It's a soufflé which is popular in the city I was born. I guess you'd call it Bolian soufflé."

"You are having desert for dinner?"

She grinned sheepishly. "One of my many vices," she said. "You want to try it? Trust me it's really good."

"Why not?" He pushed his half empty plate across the table and then watched her drop a couple of spoons of the dish onto it. He pulled the plate

back and gingerly tried the soufflé. It was sweeter than he had anticipated and his face showed his surprise.

She giggled. "I suppose it's an acquired taste."

"It's not bad."

But she seemed to see through his half-truth and the fact that he was obviously not enjoying it as much as she did.

"Do you mind me asking you a personal question, Marjorie?"

She smirked "Why does a Bolian have a human first name?"

He nodded. "I had been wondering."

"My parents were scholars of human history and quite fond of it. They named me after a Scottish princess. And a much suffering one at that."

"Couldn't have been an easy childhood for you either."

"I guess that was their plan." She began to eat her soufflé and spoke between gulps. "Toughen me up early on."

"Did it work?"

"Made me want to join Starfleet as soon as I turned seventeen."

"May have been their plan all along."

She considered her dinner companion closely. "You may be right about that."

Leva was glad he had been able to make her come out of her shell a little. Marjorie Alendra had been just as reserved as most of the other crewmembers he had met on *Sacajawea* with the exception perhaps of Doctor Newheiser who had such an eerie aura that Leva hadn't considered him a pleasant conversationalist.

Oddly enough Leva had never considered himself a very social person and on *Eagle* he had likely earned himself a reputation of being the most private officer second only to Commander Xylion. But this crew was putting even him to shame.

"Mind letting me in on what is going on with this crew?"

She glanced up at him, her eyes guarded now. "What do you mean?"

"Come on, you know exactly what I mean. Nobody here seems to want to spend more than five minutes with me, not even the captain who prefers hiding himself away in his quarters or the ready room where he consumes copious amounts of scotch whiskey."

Alendra glanced around quickly as if to make sure nobody was in earshot before she looked back at the first officer. Then she shrugged. "I've only been on this ship for a bit over a year and it was pretty much like this

when I came aboard. Maybe it has gotten a little worse since we lost most of our senior officers." She kept her voice hushed now.

"You don't find this concerning?"

"Why do you think I'm so glad that you are here now?" she said. "I'll be putting in my transfer request as soon as possible."

That was not what he had wanted to hear. "That bad?"

"You tell me," she said. "I've only served on one other ship before *Sacajawea*. I wasn't a senior officer there and we were at war even then but it was a far cry from what it is like here. Is this normal for you? Was your last ship anything like this?"

He glanced around the room. It was very quiet for a crew lounge. On *Eagle* he would have expected to overhear conversations, people telling jokes and hearing occasional laughter, even during the worst days of the Dominion war the crew lounge was usually the one place people clung to at least a modicum of humor. In comparison this place felt like a cloister. He shook his head. "No, nothing like this."

"It's the captain, I think." She spoke in an almost conspiratorial sounding voice now, but clearly not entirely comfortable talking about him behind his back. "He pretty much sets the tone on board and it almost feels as if he's given up. I don't know if he's always been like this or if he has somehow lost his drive during the war. And then there is Newheiser."

"What about the doctor?"

Her voice dropped even further. "The man is downright creepy, haven't you noticed? The rumors onboard range from him being an intelligence plant to a shape-shifting Founder."

Leva very much doubted the latter could be true. Of course stranger things had happened and in fact he had once had the misfortune of coming face to face with an ill-tempered changeling who had impersonated various Starfleet officers and who had gotten fairly close to killing him and his comrades. But it seemed unlikely the Dominion would have gone through the trouble of embedding one of their own on a small and seemingly insignificant little frigate like *Sacajawea*.

"What about Hendricks?"

She shrugged but sounded a lot less ominous when talking about the chief engineer. "Preston is okay. He just keeps his head down and does his job as best as he can. He isn't one of those miracle Starfleet engineers one always hears about and I doubt he'll ever rise much higher than where he

is now but I suppose with some mentoring he'll make a decent officer someday."

Leva smirked at that.

"What?"

"You sound just like an XO."

She blushed slightly.

Then he leaned in closer. "Marjorie, do me a favor and give me a few weeks before you make up your mind about that transfer request. So far you're the only officer on this ship I have any kind of rapport with, not to mention that we are clearly woefully undermanned. Give me a chance to try and turn things around. If things don't change and you still feel like you want to get out of here, I'll fully support any career decision you make."

She nodded firmly. "You have my word, I won't leave you hanging." She offered a little smile. "I won't go until you at least have been able to get a suitable replacement. As for turning things around on this ship, I'm sorry to say I just don't have much faith. I hope I'm wrong but this place just seems like a lost cause to me."

Leva frowned. No doubt most of the crew seemed to feel the same way, including the captain. But Alendra was right about one thing. Even if he wanted to make a real change on *Sacajawea*, the deck was already stacked against him.

Valeria's architectural style reminded Owens of ancient Roman designs, employing a great deal of gleaming white marble-like materials, tall columns and high arches. Even the smooth cobblestone roads seemed to mirror that ancient style employed over a hundred of light years away. Too bad the weather was anything but Mediterranean as the rain continued to drizzle down on the away team with no apparent end in sight.

Other than the building style however, Valeria's capital was a far cry from Rome, Paris or most other cities Michael Owens had ever stepped foot in. Here, buildings had been constructed much farther apart than he would have expected for a major metropolis. The roads were wide and the landscape—interspersed with wide ranging vegetation—had a much more rural feel, as if they were visiting a small provincial outpost instead of what he assumed to be the center of Valerian power and culture.

Deen explained. "Valeria has a very low population density compared to other worlds of similar technological and industrial scale. Valeria has never developed city-like population clusters such as on Earth and many other planets. Therefore its population has never grown beyond a few hundred million."

This also meant a bit of walking as Valerians clearly weren't big believers in cars or skimmers, judging from the predominant foot traffic Owens noticed as they were being escorted across town.

It was beginning to get dark on this side of the planet and he could see soft, low lights flickering in the windows of the few houses they passed. Most of it seemed to be natural light as if produced by candles or open fires. But this couldn't be because of a lack of technology. He spotted many signs of advanced machinery, including public comm terminals and streetlights. None of which appeared to be operational.

"Is there a power problem in the city?" He glanced towards the lead Marine.

"Energy shortages have led to rationalization, sir." The Andorian spoke curtly and without slowing his pace or deigning the captain with as much as a look.

Deen was curious. "What's the reason for the energy shortages?"

Her natural charm seemed to manage to coax a little bit more out of him, even if he still refused to make eye contact. "Not for me to say,

ma'am. However a new plant is expected to go online later this week. Should solve the problem."

"Fighting a ground war consumes a great amount of energy." Wasco explained.

Deen looked skeptical. "At the expense of the local population?"

But the major didn't have a response. His body language seemed to imply what was on his mind. War required sacrifice.

After about a ten minute walk Owens could spot their likely destination. The building was larger than most others he had seen so far and stood out like a sore thumb. Sure, its foreign designers had attempted to mimic the local style, but had overdone it a bit with the tall columns and its imposing size. The blue flag flying high above it made it clear that this was the formal Federation presence on Valeria; its embassy and as far as Owens understood, having been repurposed as the Marines HQ.

A group of a dozen Valerians had assembled close to the outer barricades of the building, at least a hundred meters from the building proper. Beyond those fortified positions heavily armed Marines stood guard along with a whole array of menacing looking automated phaser canons. And differently to most of the technology they had encountered so far, these weapons looked fully powered and ready to unleash deadly blasts of energy at a moment's notice.

These locals were clearly not too happy about the Federation presence on their world and were making their complaints known loudly. Two uniformed Valerians were standing nearby, watching the small crowd.

The Andorian signaled the team to stop well before they reached the demonstrators and then he along with six of his fellow Marines approached the group only to be intercepted by the two local security officers. Owens noticed that the Valerians didn't appear armed. That didn't stop the Marines from raising their own rifles.

"You know the rules," the sergeant hissed. "One hundred fifty meters from the embassy. You are far too close. Get these people back. Do it now."

But the Valerians seemed uncooperative. "By my measure these people are exactly one hundred fifty meters from the grounds." The purple-haired female officer defiantly crossed her arms in front of her chest and refused to be dominated by the heavily armed Marines.

"Do your gods-damned jobs or we will," the Andorian growled.

“Let me worry about my job and you can go back to doing yours.” The woman had a little smirk on her face but her tone revealed that she wasn’t amused. “I think there are parts of this planet you haven’t blown up yet.”

“Final warning, Sharval. Get these people out of here now.” He brought up his rifle, the emitter cone nearly touching her chest.

“Or what? You’re going to shoot me. Right in front of all these people? A few too many witnesses, even for you, don’t you think?”

The sergeant shoved her so hard with his rifle, it forced her to stumble backwards.

“Hey!” Her male colleague stepped forward to intervene but before he could get close a second Marine shoved him back even harder, causing him to fall to the ground.

“Don’t touch him.” The woman pushed the Marine back.

In response for her trouble, the Andorian sergeant struck out with the butt of his rifle, catching her by the forehead and sending her flying to the ground as well.

Owens had seen enough. “Stand down!” He easily slipped past his Marine escort which was too slow to hold him back and managed to get to the fallen woman’s side before they could corral him.

“Sir, please, do not get involved. We have the situation under control.” The Andorian watched the captain help the woman he had just struck with a scolding frown.

“From where I was standing it looked to me like you had anything but control, Sergeant.” He carefully reached out for the security officer and helped her get onto her back. He couldn’t claim that he had met many Valerians before but he was surprised by what he found. She looked to be in her mid-thirties by human standards. She had fine, long purple hair and striking blue eyes. Differently to most male Valerians her skin was perfectly smooth with a less domineering ridge running up her nose to her forehead and past her v-shaped hairline. Her nostrils which on male Valerians were usually positioned underneath their eye sockets were small and oval shaped openings at the side of her nasal ridge. She had a nasty cut on her brow above her left eye which was oozing maroon-colored blood. “Are you alright?”

“Sir, with all due respect.” The Marine sounded more insistent this time and took a step closer. “I need you to move away and let us deal with

this. We are familiar with this woman. She is a known agitator and trouble maker and needs to be arrested.”

“She’s a local peace officer.” Owens glared up at the man. “And you will not lay another finger on her. In fact, I need you to step back and lower your weapon right now. That’s an order.”

The Andorian stopped but didn’t make another move otherwise.

Not until Major Wasco stepped closer to the man. “Do we have a problem here, Sergeant? Was any part of that order unclear to you?”

The Marine frowned at Owens and then shot a quick look at Wasco before shaking his head. “No, sir, no problem at all.” His annoyance was not easily missed but ultimately he turned on his heels, indicating for his men to follow him back to rejoin the rest of the escort team.

With Owens’ help, the woman slowly got back onto her feet.

“Take it easy, you’ve been injured.”

She gingerly touched the wound, her fingers coming away with blood. “What, this?” she said. “It’s a scratch. I’ve had worse. You must be new around here.”

He nodded. “Captain Michael Owens from the starship *Eagle*. And I’m profoundly sorry you and your colleague were treated in this manner. It was unacceptable and entirely uncalled for.”

She offered him a guarded smile. “My valiant Sky Knight come to save the poor Land Maiden besieged by the Ancient Enemy. Name’s Sharval. Sub-commissioner Sharval if you insist on being formal.” She stuck out her hand. “I think this is how you humans like to say hello.”

Owens took her hand and shook it. “I can arrange for you to get medical assistance inside the embassy if you like.”

Sharval’s smile turned into a glare before she vehemently shook her head. “You’re not getting me in there.” When she appeared to recognize the concern in his eyes she added, “Don’t worry I know a good doctor. It’s not often one of your people cares this much about the well-being of a Valerian.”

Owens frowned. “I don’t know what you’re used to but this is not how members of Starfleet typically conduct themselves.”

She gave him another, wide smirk, showing off rows of white teeth, and then brushed the tips of her fingers somewhat playfully across the width of his chest. “Welcome to Valeria. Get ready to have your views of the universe turned upside down.” She allowed her colleague to help her

walk away but shot Owens one last grin over her shoulder. "Take care of yourself, Sky Knight. This can be a dangerous place to be."

Deen joined Owens by his side, looking after the departing Valerian officer. "Making friends with the locals, I see."

But Owens hardly even registered what she had said. Even when they were finally being escorted inside the embassy, he couldn't stop thinking of Sharval's last words.

After three days on *Sacajawea*, Leva had finally decided to exchange his mustard-colored operations and security uniform shirt—a color he had worn for practically his entire career—for a maroon shirt of command. He'd continue serving as the ship's chief tactical and security officer until he had trained a replacement, but the change in department, he argued, showed his dedication to his new role and ship. Captain Mahoney didn't seem to care either way and in fact the man had spent the majority of his time since Leva had arrived holed up in his ready room, leaving his first officer pretty much in charge of running the ship and overseeing their current mission.

Leva still didn't agree with this his hands-off approach but on the other hand, he didn't mind the opportunity of running the show, gaining experience both in command and with this ship and crew. It was a chance he hadn't gotten often on *Eagle* except for the night shift. Leva doubted very much that Mahoney's absence was intended for his benefit.

"We are now approaching grid C12," said Ensign T'Sara, the very efficient but also incredibly young Vulcan Leva had picked out of the slim pool of qualified officers to be the ship's senior helmsman. Most Vulcans Leva had met didn't join Starfleet until they were well in their thirties or forties which thanks to their longevity still made them appear as young as most other recruits. T'Sara on the other hand was one of those rare exceptions who had joined the Academy shortly after her eighteenth birthday and who had only graduated a few months ago. A fellow Vulcan would have likely considered her a mere child. Her relative inexperience still made her the most qualified person on board to pilot the ship.

"Excellent, slow to impulse and then get us into position." He glanced at the Bolian sitting next to T'Sara at the forward facing operations console. "Lieutenant, open the cargo bay doors and stand by to deploy the comm relay."

"Aye, sir." She offered an efficient nod. "Opening cargo bay doors."

Leva swiveled around in the central captain's chair until he faced the engineering station. "Mister Hendricks, is the relay ready to be deployed?"

The young chief engineer nodded. "Yes, sir. All onboard systems read fully operational."

"We have achieved deployment position." The Vulcan didn't even glance up from her board when she spoke.

"All stop, Ensign. Lieutenant, go ahead and drop her off."

The two women acknowledged and moments later Leva could spot the cylindrical device appear on the main view screen. It slowly glided across space until it came to a standstill in its designated position.

"Fire her up, Mister Hendricks."

The chief engineer acknowledged and after less than a minute he reported success. "She's transmitting, sir." A little smile played on his lips.

Leva spotted a similar expression of accomplishment on Alendra's face and even T'Sara had a hint of pride reflected on her usually carefully schooled features. Sure, dropping off comm relays wasn't anything to write home about but this crew needed every success it could get, even a minor one such as this. Mahoney had been right, it wasn't a glamorous job but Leva thought he understood why *Sacajawea* had been chosen over a more traditional buoy tender. She was far from the most impressive vessel in the fleet, but she was a fast little ship, able to deploy the relays and reconnecting this sector of space to the rest of the Federation much faster than a slower tender. Mahoney may have been convinced that all this was just another slight against him and his ship in her steady descend into irrelevancy but Leva preferred to think of their mission as carrying out a vital Starfleet objective.

"Commander, I believe we're picking up a distress signal."

Leva turned towards the tactical station.

There he found Ensign Mirko Nikolić who he had chosen as his understudy. The young man of Serbian ancestry had been on *Sacajawea* for only a few months and graduated from the Academy a mere couple of weeks before that and yet he had shown some impressive tactical acumen and was perhaps more qualified for that position than anyone else presently on board. He wasn't comfortable yet to have the ensign hold that post while in combat but after gaining some experience he may very well take over for Leva full time.

The first officer left his chair and joined him. "Can you determine its source?"

He worked his console for a moment. "It seems to be originating from a Thulian freighter, point two five light-years from our position."

"Audio?"

Nikolić shook his head, "Text only. 'Ship under attack. Requesting immediate assistance from any vessel in range'." He turned to look at the first officer standing at his side.

Leva nodded and faced towards the front of the bridge. "T'Sara, plot a course. Captain, please report to the bridge."

For the fact that Mahoney's ready room was directly adjacent to the bridge, it took him a surprisingly long time to emerge. When he finally did he had not bothered to put on his jacket and considered Leva mildly annoyed. "What is it, Commander? I thought I had made it clear that I have complete faith in your abilities to oversee our current mission without my input."

"It's a distress signal, sir." Leva relieved Nikolić at the tactical station, now that he was anticipating a potentially hostile situation he preferred handling things himself. However he indicated for the young man to stay close so he could observe. "Ship under attack."

Mahoney hesitated and glanced towards the screen as if he could find the source of the distress signal there. "Where?"

"Quarter of a light-year from our current position," Leva said. "At high warp we can reach it in less than two hours."

The captain nodded but said nothing, his eyes still focused on the view screen which currently showed nothing but the comm relay they had deployed.

Leva forced himself to suppress a frown brought on by Mahoney's complete lack of urgency. He could spot Alendra and T'Sara exchanging quick looks while they were awaiting new orders. "Sir?"

It was apparently only then that Mahoney noticed that most eyes on the bridge were looking in his direction. "We're not equipped for any kind of rescue mission," he said. "Forward the message to another ship."

Leva stood from his chair. "Sir, we are the closest vessel. We should respond."

Mahoney sighed heavily and then waved off his first officer with a hand. "Fine, fine." He took his seat. "Helm, plot a course."

"Course already plotted, sir."

"Then what are you waiting for? Go to maximum warp."

T'Sara nodded crisply. "Engaging."

Seconds later *Sacajawea* had jumped to warp.

Mahoney stayed on the bridge for the entire duration it took them to reach the source of the distress signal. But he didn't ask many questions or

request up to date sensor reports as Leva would have expected from Owens when *Eagle* would head towards a possibly dangerous and hostile situation. Of course this didn't stop him from preparing the ship for combat on his own initiative. He hadn't had a chance yet to run any battle drills, something that according to the logs had never been a regular practice on *Sacajawea*. Fortunately, the ship itself was ready for a fight. All phaser banks were operating within recommended tolerance levels and the ship carried a satisfactory amount of photon and quantum torpedoes. The deflector shields had a few more weaknesses than he would have liked but should hold up fine as long as they didn't expose their weak ventral side.

"I have sensor contact." Alendra was carefully studying her console as they approached the last known coordinates of the ship in distress. "One freighter is being attacked by two small escorts."

"On screen." Leva had to give the order when Mahoney had remained quiet.

The viewer shifted to reveal the scene they were about to drop in on. The bulky cargo vessel was doing the best it could to evade incoming fire from two smaller ships, both about half the size of *Sacajawea*. It was a futile effort and their best hope had been to buy themselves some time until somebody would answer their cry for help. The freighter was already venting atmosphere and drive plasma from various hull breaches.

Mahoney's features hardened at seeing the one sided battle. "Commander, hail the attacking vessels and warn them off."

Leva sent a strong worded challenge to the two escorts but was rewarded only with silence. However his instruments confirmed that the ships were receiving the signal. They simply chose to disregard it. "No response, Captain. They are ignoring us."

"Open a channel."

"Go ahead, sir," he said after he had made sure they would be able to receive whatever Mahoney was going to say next.

"This is Captain Evan Mahoney from the Starfleet vessel USS *Sacajawea*," he said. "You will disengage your attack immediately or we will respond with appropriate force."

Leva actually smirked. It had been the first time he had heard Mahoney sound truly authoritative, clearly the man could show some teeth if he wanted to.

Unfortunately it wasn't enough to impress the crews of those ships which continued their assault without hesitation.

The captain swiveled his chair to face his first officer at tactical. "You analysis?"

He already had a report ready. "The attacking ships are Cardassian *Hideki*-class escorts."

"Cardassians?"

"Possibly but unlikely. These particular vessel are at least two generations removed from the ships the Cardassian fleet currently employs."

"Could be military surplus."

Leva nodded. "A number of worlds in this sector are known to use old Cardassian ships. They could also be mercenaries or pirates who have gotten their hands on outdated military vessels. Regardless, they should be no match for *Sacajawea*."

"Good. Tactical suggestion?"

"Attack pattern kappa-six. We'll use a lot of initial firepower, just short of disabling their shields but enough to show them we mean business. That should be more than enough to make them think twice about keeping this up."

Mahoney smirked. "Shock and awe? I like it. Let's do it."

"Now entering weapon's range," T'Sara said.

"Red alert." Mahoney gripped his armrests a little tighter. "Drop out of warp and engage kappa-six."

T'Sara had the ship pop out of subspace nearly right on top of the two smaller *Hideki* escorts and Leva wasted no time to energize all forward phaser banks as well as firing a couple of photon torpedoes, alternatively targeting both vessels. He realized quickly that he had to be careful with how much power he unleashed on their opponents. It had been a long time since he had fought in a battle where their objective had not been the complete destruction of the enemy. During the war, more often than not, it had been a game of us or them and restraint had been a tactic which would have guaranteed defeat. Of course it didn't help that those outmoded Cardassian ships, shaped very much like some sort of oversized crustaceans with giant pincers at their stern, were still very similar to the kind of vessels they had fought against in the war.

His calculations turned out to be correct and their shields held. But barely and no doubt the crews of both vessels had been rattled to their bones by those initial hits. As predicted the first ship disengaged and ran. The second ship however had other ideas.

"They are coming about." Alendra watched the battle unfold on the view screen where the smaller ship unleashed a few rounds of amber phaser fire which did little damage to *Sacajawea's* shields.

"Bad idea," said Mahoney. "Mister Leva, kindly show them why."

He nodded. "Ensign, turn sharply heading 231 mark 5 and keep our ventral side tucked away."

The Vulcan understood and carried out the order.

On his tactical screens, Leva could see that she had steered the ship exactly how he had wished, dipping their saucer section right into the enemy's flight path and thereby allowing him to bring to bear *Sacajawea's* most powerful phaser banks at a devastating angle.

In its already weakened state, the remaining escort had no choice but to break off sharply but not before its shields collapsed and its weapons failed. Leva nodded with satisfaction. "They're making a run for it."

Mahoney leaned forwards in his chair as if he had caught a scent. "They're not going to get far. Ensign, pursuit course. Match their speed. Commander Leva, prepare torpedoes. Let's blow her out of the stars."

T'Sara did as she was told and within moments they were chasing their fleeing enemy's tail. But Leva hesitated. "Sir, she will likely not survive a direct torpedo hit."

"She had her chance to follow her friend and get out of here. Now she'll pay the price for thinking she could take us on."

A week earlier he wouldn't have hesitated to fire those weapons but now it seemed like senseless killing to him and there had been more than enough of that during the war. A well-placed phaser burst instead would likely be enough to disable them.

"Where's my torpedo?" Mahoney practically barked.

But before Leva could speak up, Alendra beat him to it. "Captain, the ship is going to warp."

Indeed on the view screen the small Cardassian escort disappeared with a bright flash.

Mahoney grimaced and then turned his chair until he faced his first officer, his eyes accusatory. Leva returned the hard look defiantly.

The Bolian interrupted yet again. "We're being hailed by the freighter."

Mahoney aborted the impromptu staring contest and faced the viewer again. "Put them on screen, Lieutenant."

"It's audio only, sir"

"Speakers, then."

*"This is the Thulian transport Intral to Federation vessel Sacajawea. We wish to express our gratitude for your timely intervention. Without it these pirates would have surely stolen our cargo and destroyed our vessel."* The disembodied voice had a distinct metallic sound to it as if it was being filtered through another computer or apparatus.

*"Intral, this is Captain Mahoney from the Sacajawea. No thanks are required. We were happy to help."* He wore a noticeably pleased expression now. *"Do you require any assistance?"*

*"We should be able to carry out most of our repairs while we get underway. We carry a great amount of relief supplies for Cardassian and Federation colonies and our timely arrival is of great importance."*

*"Understood, Intral."* Mahoney nodded. *"We will remain on station until you have departed just in case these pirates decide to take another crack at you."*

*"Once again please accept our thanks for your assistance, Intral out."*

Mahoney stood and tugged on his uniform jacket. *"Well done, people. That was a good job all around."* He even glanced at his first officer, his displeasure at his earlier hesitation now seemingly forgotten.

In fact in the short time Leva had been on board, he had never seen the man so seemingly proud of his ship and crew. Perhaps all it had taken to get him acting like a real Starfleet captain again was the chance of making a tangible difference. He had practically seemed like a different person during their short conflict with those pirates and as far as Leva was concerned that was a good sign.

Owens and his away team were led into a large office which once upon a time had likely served the ambassador to Valeria. A flag carrying the official emblem of the Starfleet Marines had been added next to a Federation flag behind an opulent, dark wood desk and right in front of a row of four tall windows which allowed a terrific view of the small capital city.

Behind the desk sat General Lam who stood the moment his guests entered the room. Lam defied the stereotype of short and nimble Asian men. Instead he stood just a little taller than Owens and nearly as tall as Wasco. He had similarly broad shoulders and even though his age, which Owens guessed at somewhere around sixty, he was still in splendid physical condition with a muscular physique noticeable even through the combat fatigues he wore.

“Captain Owens, a pleasure of making your acquaintance.” He stepped around his desk to greet his guests. He offered his hand and Owens didn’t miss the man’s firm grip.

“General Lam, thank you for inviting us,” he said. “This is Lieutenant Deen, my operations officer and Gul Belore from the Cardassian military. And of course you know Major Wasco.”

A large smile came over Lam’s features when he spotted the Tenarian woman, a reaction Owens had counted on. Deen had an undeniable effect on people and the captain hadn’t been shy of using her in diplomatic settings or when trying to put others around him at ease. If she had a problem with his tactic of exploiting her people’s unique aura, she had never mentioned it. Instead she gave the general a large smile of her own. “A pleasure, General.”

“The pleasure is all mine, my dear, trust me.” He shook her hand, his grip a lot less firm this time and kept his eyes on the beautiful woman a little longer before moving on to Belore. “Gul.” He only exchanged a curt nod with him and Owens wasn’t quite sure if this was because he knew that Cardassians were less fond of handshakes or if he had a genuine dislike for the man. Considering what Lam had been doing the last two years, it was hard to fault him for being cautious of Cardassians.

But his features quickly lightened up again when he turned to the major. "Cesar." He gripped his hand and clasped the other Marine's shoulder. "It is damn good to see you again, old friend."

"Thank you, sir," he said. "It's good to see you as well."

Lam's pleasure of meeting an old comrade in arms was impossible to miss. The man clearly thought as highly of Wasco as the major did of the general. Owens was grateful for this; it would certainly make this mission easier.

"Can I get you something?" But he didn't wait for a response. "I'm afraid there isn't much of a choice at the moment with the energy situation what it is but I can offer you something from my private collection." He looked towards one of his guards by the door. "Lieutenant, get us a bottle of my *huangjiu* with five glasses." The officer quickly departed and Lam considered his guests again. "It's brewed right in my home town, a real treat, I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

"General," began Owens, "while I appreciate your hospitality, I would much rather discuss how we can implement an immediate ceasefire on Valeria in preparation to getting your troops home."

Lam took a small step back in order to lean against his desk. "So there really is a peace treaty with the Dominion?"

"Yes, sir." Wasco looked straight at his old mentor. "The war is over."

Lam nodded slowly but his eyes seemed unfocused. "That's good. Very good." He glanced back at Owens. "Our communications have been spotty since the Cardassians destroyed our comm center along with all our subspace receivers. We haven't been able to send or receive any messages from Command in over two months."

Belore aimed a quick look at Lam. "Gul Metral seems to have much the same problem."

"You've spoken to Metral?"

Owens nodded. "Yes. And the good news is he's willing to agree to a ceasefire considering the changed circumstances."

But Lam didn't look optimistic. "I wish I could trust Metral but he's a shifty character who is not above exploiting such an opportunity for his own benefit."

"To what end?" said Deen. "There is no more victory for him to achieve."

"I've dealt with that man for nearly two years, Lieutenant, I know how he thinks." Lam shook his head. "No, there is no doubt in my mind that he will try and make a move to claim this world for Cardassia. The situation on Valeria is already complicated enough. We have to tread very carefully now."

"What exactly is the situation, General?" Owens tried to keep his features as well as his voice as neutral as possible but after the incident that had taken place outside, he found it difficult to do so. "On our way here we witnessed an altercation between your men and the locals."

This seemed to interest Lam a great deal. "What kind of altercation?"

"There was a protest by Valerians right outside the embassy," explained Wasco and Lam nodded as if he was fully aware of such occurrences. "The situation got out of control when our men confronted the Valerian security detail."

"That's putting it mildly." Deen frowned to communicate her displeasure at what she had seen. "Your Marines pretty much attacked without provocation, injuring at least one peace officer."

Lam uttered a heavy sigh. "That is very unfortunate and not the kind of behavior I expect from my men." The general sounded stern but hardly surprised. "Don't worry, I'll make sure the people responsible are disciplined appropriately. But you must understand that most of these men have been serving on this world for nearly 24 months without interruption. Sometimes it can become a challenge to keep one's temper in check."

Owens offered a little nod. "Even more reason to try and end this as soon as possible."

Lam's aide returned with a tablet carrying a tall bottle with noticeable Chinese characters on the label, alongside five glasses. He placed it on the desk and then left. Lam opened the bottle and began pouring the yellowish wine into the glasses.

"What I don't understand is why would the Valerians be demonstrating in the first place? It's not very often that a local population opposes a Federation presence." Deen aimed a brief glance at her captain and Owens showed his agreement with a nod, before she glanced back at the general.

"That's just a small minority." Lam continued filling the glasses. "Most Valerians are thankful we are here to stand between them and the Cardassians taking over their world. When this first started, the Valerians were very concerned about the Dominion spreading their influence over

this planet and Starfleet was and remains their only chance to truly oppose them. It was a task we were happy to take on.”

Owens nodded. “Because Command was worried that the Dominion might use Valeria as a staging platform against Federation targets.”

“That is correct. But the situation quickly turned into a stalemate and only got worse when both Starfleet and the Dominion decided to reduce their support for the Valeria campaign. I suppose they figured that because the planet is non-aligned, it didn’t warrant taking up a great amount of resources which could be used elsewhere. I’ve been doing whatever I can to keep the remaining Cardassians at bay since then but it hasn’t been easy without any kind of serious backing from Command. At least we have the Valerian’s support. We signed a promise of cooperation with Supreme Monarch Heral just last year. He is as concerned as I am about a Cardassian presence on Valeria.”

Owens frowned. He had not read anything in the reports on Valeria about any kind of treaty between this world and the Federation other than a non-aggression pact the Valerians had signed with both the Dominion and the Federation to attempt and stay neutral in the war. Things had clearly not quite worked out like that.

Lam offered Owens a glass and noticed his concerns. “It’s not truly a formal, political treaty. But as you can imagine operating on a non-Federation world has had its challenges and having the supreme monarch’s blessing as well as the assistance of his security forces to maintain order among the populace has made this a lot less complicated than it has to be.”

Owens took the glass but didn’t immediately try the wine. “The Valerians did not have a real stake in this war. Neither the Dominion nor the Federation have considered Valeria an important strategic location for over a year.”

“Perhaps not but as the Cardassian didn’t leave, I did not feel it appropriate for us to abandon the Valerians in their hour of need.” Lam took a sip of his wine, clearly enjoying the beverage. “The supreme monarch agreed.”

It took Owens a moment to understand the implications of what the general had said. It seemed to answer the nagging question in the back of his mind of why Lam had continued to lobby the powers that were to remain on Valeria even after the Dominion had lost interest.

Deen looked equally confounded. "If I may ask, General, what does this mean for the people living on this world? How does the local population fit into the war being waged on their own planet?"

If Lam was offended by Deen's somewhat critical tone, he didn't let it show. Deen tended to get away with things some other people might not have. "We are still Starfleet officers, Lieutenant and we go to great lengths to avoid civilian casualties. I wish I could say the same for the Cardassians but unfortunately their tolerances for collateral damage are much higher than ours." He shot a fleeting glance at Belore who hardly reacted to this not-so-veiled implication.

Owens suppressed a sigh he felt coming on. This mission was becoming much more complicated by the minute. Instead of rolling into town like a herald of peace and expecting everyone to lay down their weapons, he was instead faced with a military and diplomatic quagmire. But he wasn't entirely sure if the complications were truly as difficult as Lam seemed to suggest or if he was somehow embellishing the facts. "What would you suggest we do in order to bring peace to Valeria as soon as possible, General?"

It was almost as if Lam had been waiting for the opportunity to lay out his own plan and he quickly stepped back behind his desk and took a seat. "First and foremost we need to fortify our positions to be prepared for Metral's next move; one which I guarantee he will make now that he'll be expecting us to draw down. It's an opportunity he won't be willing to miss. Our biggest challenge as you can imagine are shortages of troops and, perhaps even worse, a scarcity of energy. Fighting a war for two years requires a lot of power for ammunition, vehicles, feeding and clothing the troops and so on."

Wasco nodded. "We noticed the power outages in town."

"An unfortunate side effect. Thankfully we are fairly close to completing a new fusion plant which should give us all the power we'll need and then some. With the real threat of an imminent attack by Metral, we need to accelerate our efforts. That's where you come in, Captain."

"How?" Owens was already sure he wouldn't like this at all.

"A ship like yours carries a great amount of resources which would give us an important tactical advantage over Metral. I need you to beam down your engineers as well as any materiel you can spare such as industrial replicators so that we can complete the power plant ahead of

schedule." He glanced at Wasco next. "Cesar, how many men did you bring with you?"

"We didn't bring any additional troops, General. But we do have Echo Company on *Eagle*. That's about a hundred forty Marines."

Lam nodded. "That's not much but better than nothing. We can use your company for additional peace keeping duties which will free up—"

Owens had heard enough. "I'm sorry, General, but I'm not sure I'm comfortable with this plan. I didn't come here to put more boots on the ground." He placed his untouched beverage back onto the desk.

Lam glared at the starship captain and Owens could tell that this was not a man used to have his orders questioned. He had grown accustomed to giving them and for people to follow them with little hesitation. Lam managed to soften his expression before he began to talk again. "I understand that this is not what you expected when you came here, Captain. I wish the situation were different as well but the reality is not what they think it is back in Paris or San Francisco."

"My orders are to prepare you to come home, General."

"And what I'm proposing is how we make sure that we do it right."

The captain shook his head. "There must be another way."

"There isn't and no amount of wishing it were otherwise will make it so. You may not realize this yet, but this is the truth of the situation on the ground and as every wartime commander worth his salt knows, the situation on the ground can change in a heartbeat. Our job is to adapt to these changes as best as we can. We adapt or we die."

Deen pointed out the obvious. "The war is over, General."

"Not on Valeria it's not."

That left Owens stunned and he wasn't sure how to respond to that statement. General Lam was at least right about one point. He had not expected this. He had mostly worried about the Cardassians. He had been concerned about Belore being unable to get through to Gul Metral, he had not foreseen that Lam would be the one he had to convince to put down his weapons and pack up his campaign. "With all due respect, General, I simply cannot accept that. The war between the Federation and the Dominion is over. Your campaign on this world is part of that war. Starfleet wants it to end without delay and for you and your people to come home."

Lam didn't immediately respond to this and for a moment the general simply stared back at his guest. At the outsider; the man who had

come here, onto his planet, into his very office, to tell him what to do. To say that the tension in the room had suddenly spiked to a level far above what was considered comfortable, would not have done justice to the situation.

Even Gul Belore had to be feeling the sudden drop in temperature judging by the way his prominent neck ridges were tensing. DeMara Deen, the eternal optimist, looked positively distraught and Wasco seemed torn.

But Michael Owens was not about to back down and neither it appeared would General Lam.

Ultimately however the Marine did break eye contact and began to nod very slowly. "I appreciate the difficult position this places you in, Captain. I understand that all this is quite a bit to take in. Why don't you take some time to think this over? As our guests, please feel free to make yourself at home. Spend the night, get to know this world and the challenges we face here and perhaps you will start to see that what I have proposed is the only way forward." Lam glanced at his aide again. "Lieutenant, please escort the captain and his team to the guest rooms and see to any needs they may have."

Owens fought to keep the frown off his face. He didn't like the idea of delaying his mission by even as little as a day, after all there was still no ceasefire in effect which meant that Starfleet and Cardassian forces continued to fight each other on Valeria, possibly even at this very moment. But it had also become clear to him that General Lam was convinced that any overtures of peace at this time would be a tragic mistake.

He needed a new strategy to make the general see that it was his only choice. And even though his mission to Valeria was perfectly clear, Lam outranked him and he couldn't simply order the man to negotiate an end to hostilities with the Cardassians. Begrudgingly he decided to take up Lam's offer to hopefully figure out his next move.

*Sacajawea* had stayed on station even after the Thulian freighter had departed and Leva wasn't entirely sure about the reasoning for this. All he knew was that they had received another transmission and that Mahoney had taken it in private in his ready room. It wasn't from Starfleet, of that much he was certain. So far they had only deployed two comm relays and not nearly enough to reestablish reliable communications with Command from their present location.

To his surprise the captain had called a senior staff meeting and he assumed that the occasion would reveal the nature of the mystery communiqué.

He didn't miss that Mahoney strode into the briefing room with his chin held high. Clearly the confidence boost he had experienced from their short altercation with the pirates had not worn off yet. He took his chair and shortly regarded his four officers before he spoke. "I had the pleasure of being contacted by representatives of the Thulian government who wished to express their gratitude for coming to their freighter's assistance. They further explained to me that these pirate attacks have been more frequent over the last two weeks, particularly going after convoys transporting relief supplies for the Federation and Cardassia. The Thulians do not have a significant armed fleet to protect these convoys. After being told of our actions here, they have asked me if we'd be willing to assist them in tracking down these pirates and putting a stop to their efforts."

Nobody spoke up straight away as the captain's words sunk in.

Leva decided to go first. "We are already on a mission."

But Mahoney shook his head. "Deploying a few relays isn't a mission, it's a milk run. We have a chance to make a real difference here."

Alendra looked slightly skeptical as well. "Shouldn't we check in with Starfleet first?"

The first officer nodded. "Yes, but we would have to deploy additional relays before we could open real-time or minimally delayed communications."

"We could head back towards Gamma Seven." Hendricks glanced at the captain. "From there we should be able to make contact."

It was clearly not what Mahoney had been thinking. "Going back will take days. And so is deploying more of those relays. In the meantime these pirates will have nearly free reign to destroy or plunder thousands of tons of cargo meant for people in need."

"Captain, what about possible Prime Directive –"

But Mahoney cut Leva off. "Does not apply here."

Leva shot the man a quizzical look. "You say you've been contacted by government representatives. This would make this an internal Thulian matter."

"The convoys are being attacked in neutral space and the cargo that is being targeted is meant for us." Mahoney spoke sharply, perhaps even a bit impatiently as if he hadn't expected to have to argue this point. "That's enough for me to justify involvement."

Leva glanced at the operations officer. "Lieutenant, what do we know about the Thulians?"

The Bolian had to refer to a padd and Leva suppressed the urge to smirk. She wasn't quite Xylion or even Deen who would have had that kind of information already prepared. "Uh, right, the Thulians. Native to Ultima Thule, a star system roughly two light-years from our present position. They seem to be mildly xenophobic as we don't seem to have much information on them other than that they are part of an extensive trading network in this sector which includes the Fahleenians and the Valerians. They've routinely traded with both us and the Cardassians. The term Thulians and Ultima Thule are Federation designations as their true name is not actually known."

Leva nodded at her report and then looked back at Mahoney.

"So they like to keep to themselves. Even more reason to come to their aid now that they seem to have decided to make contact with us. We may be able to lay down the groundwork for improved diplomatic relations."

"I think it is a splendid idea."

All heads turned to look towards Doctor Newheiser.

"The crew could use a few success stories and ending the scourge of piracy in this sector would certainly count as a big one." The doctor wore a large smirk which Leva found mostly irritating. It was impossible to tell if the man was being serious or sarcastic half the time.

Leva was still not entirely comfortable with this idea. "Starfleet is counting on us to deploy the comm relays and reestablish communications

in this sector. For all we know it may be part of a bigger strategy we are not aware of and by not carrying it out we may affect other important objectives.”

Mahoney waved off his concerns. “Or it may be nothing more than a distraction to keep us busy.” He resolutely shook his head. “And it’s not as if we are abandoning our mission. It’s just going to be delayed slightly. We’ll get back to it as soon as the pirate threat has been dealt with.”

The first officer regarded the captain with a cautious look. “Have your contacts provided you with any additional information on the identity of the pirates, their strength and numbers or their likely locations?”

“They don’t know much but they’ve given us a few places where we can start our search. As to their identity, I don’t really care. They are nothing more than opportunists. Scavengers who are profiting from the end of the war and the chaos that has followed. We’ve seen what they’re up to and their firepower has not been overly impressive. I am utterly confident that this ship and crew is more than up to the task.”

He was getting through to his officers. Both Alendra and Hendricks seemed to like the idea of finally being able to make a difference after months of being kept on the sidelines while the quadrant burned. And the fact that they didn’t have to go up against the Dominion with its massive resources seemed to make success much more likely.

To Leva it still didn’t feel quite right. He didn’t like the idea of pirates preying on freighters which transported desperately needed supplies to war-torn worlds either but what bothered him about this more than anything was Mahoney’s incredible transformation from almost utter indifference and resignation to full blown enthusiasm. He wasn't a counselor of course, but having to go into what looked like a very likely combat mission with a commanding officer displaying such significant shifts in mood and behavior seemed dangerous to him. Had he been back on *Eagle* he may have voiced these concerns to his fellow officers, maybe to the counselor or chief medical officer but here it seemed everybody was already fully on board with the captain’s plan, including the doctor. *Sacajawea* didn’t have a counselor and he doubted it would have made much of a difference anyway. This new and improved Captain Mahoney seemed like a hit to the crew and he knew he wouldn’t find much support among them.

"I would still be more comfortable if we could run this by Starfleet first." Truthfully Leva held out little hope that his concerns would be considered.

Predictably Mahoney shook his head. "That won't be possible. I've made up my mind about this and we will go after these pirates. I trust I can expect your full support in this matter, Commander."

Leva nodded. He wasn't going to go against his own captain after less than a week in his new position. He wasn't eager carrying out career suicide just yet. "That goes without saying, sir."

"Very good," he said. "Prepare the ship and crew for action, Mister Leva. We will depart immediately for our first patrol. I have a good feeling about this, people. I think we're going to make a real difference out here." He offered his officers a rare smile before he stood and then left the room with little further delay.

Leva and the others followed suit and began to leave.

He forced himself to see this mission as a good thing. Deploying the relays had marginally improved morale on the ship but he knew that a combat victory and eliminating a threat to the entire sector would likely work wonders on this inexperienced and seemingly dejected crew. If they could pull it off, he may even come to regret his own objections. Leva was big enough of a man not to mind to be proven wrong.

"I do not fully understand the nature of your request, Commander."

Tazla Star sighed as she regarded the Vulcan science officer sitting in the chair opposite hers. She had asked him to her office to discuss a rather sensitive subject but one which she was sure he would be able to assist her with. Ability of course was the lesser problem. The real issue was getting Xylion on her side to begin with. After all her request wasn't exactly one hundred percent aboveboard. She wasn't sure if it was illegal per se but it was likely not in line with Starfleet regulations.

"My service record. I need you to restrict access to it for the time being. I trust that's something you can do?"

"Yes, I can." He offered no hesitation. "It is possible to prevent the library computer to refuse access to anyone wishing to read your personnel file. However I am still not certain why you would require this."

Star rubbed her temples. She had expected him to ask that question and she really didn't want to answer it. In fact if she had known how to do it herself, she would never have asked. "Let's just say that there may be a certain individual on board who may have an interest in me. And I would prefer that he didn't."

"You speak of Mister West."

Her eyes grew slightly wider. "Yes, how do you know?"

"Mister West has approached me for an interview for one of his articles. The subject matter he is interested in is you."

"And have you agreed to this interview?"

He didn't respond straight away, instead he looked directly into her eyes, and quite possibly able to detect her anxiety there. "No, I have not."

That came as a relief. "And may I ask why not?"

"Of course." The Vulcan offered a curt nod. "While I approve of freedom of the press as it is guaranteed in the Federation Constitution, I believe that a detailed and publicly available article about a command-level officer on this vessel is not conducive to the continuity of efficient ship operations. And so while I respect Mister West's right to write and publish such an article, I see no reason to assist him in this endeavor."

"Commander, I'm very glad to here you say that." She was doing her best to mask the relief she felt at Xylion's decision not to cooperate with the

reporter. But she had no way of knowing if the rest of the crew felt the same way. "Now as you can imagine, I too would not be overly thrilled to have people read about my past exploits. That's why I need you to make it impossible for him to access my file."

"That is not feasible, sir."

"What? Why not? You just told me you could do it."

He offered a minuscule nod. "I am able to restrict access to the library computer while Mister West is on board. However, once he leaves the ship he will be free to access the requested file via any external Federation computer database or an active Memory Alpha uplink."

Star sighed. She hadn't thought of that. Xylion was able to tell *Eagle's* computer whom to give access to and whom to deny but he couldn't very well manipulate the central computer on the Memory Alpha planetoid which housed the collective Federation knowledge, including her personnel file. She nodded. "Fine, so it's going to be a temporary fix only."

"I should point out, Commander, that there are Starfleet regulations pertaining to the altering or deleting of library computer files."

"This is different." She quickly shook her head to dispel any notions that she was issuing him an illegal order. "I'm not looking to alter or deleting anything. Just restricting the file for a short while. To ensure the continuity of efficient ship operations." She hoped adding that last bit, practically quoting back to him his own words, would help secure his cooperation.

But Xylion didn't look swayed.

"Look, Commander, if there is any comeback from this, you can claim that I ordered you to do this. This will in no way reflect back on you."

"That will not be necessary. However I should point out that Mister West's civilian access level will not be sufficient to review any classified information on your record. He would only be able to gain access to basic information cleared by Starfleet Command."

She shook her head. "Atticus West doesn't strike me as a man who would be thwarted for too long by access rights issues. He's a veteran reporter used to dig up information on people. I'd rather not take any chances and make the entire file unavailable to him."

Xylion stood. "As you wish, Commander. I will carry out the necessary modifications to the computer within the hour. I will further program a randomized sequence that will lock out Mister West of

additional computer entries in order to make it appear like a temporary computer malfunction and reduce his suspicions that we have targeted your file specifically.”

Star allowed herself a small smile. That was a pretty clever idea she hadn’t considered. West would most likely still figure out that she was behind it all eventually but at least this way she could keep a certain level of plausible deniability about the whole thing. “Thank you, Commander, I appreciate this.”

He offered another minimal nod and then left her office.

Not a moment after he was gone, the door annunciator sounded again and she begged her new visitor to enter. It turned out to be Doctor Katanga.

“There you are.” He stepped into her office with determined strides. “You’re supposed to be in your quarters. Don’t tell me you forgot.”

She leaned back in her chair. “I can’t do it today, Eli. The captain is on an away mission and I’m in command until he comes back. We have to postpone.”

Katanga nodded as he stepped closer to her desk. “I understand and I figured you’d say something like that.” He sat in the chair Xylion had vacated only a short while earlier. “But that’s not really why I came to see you.”

“Oh?”

“What’s going on?”

She offered him a quizzical glance in response.

It didn’t take. “Don’t give me that look, Dez. Even if I hadn’t known you for more than half my lifetime I’d be easily able to tell that something has been bothering you a great deal over the last few days. You’ve been practically zoned out for hours. Your body is here but your mind is somewhere else entirely.”

She frowned. She hadn’t realized that it had been so obvious. “I’ve had a lot to think about lately.”

“About our intrepid journalist guest and his newly found interest in your life?”

Star stood suddenly, uttering a heavy sigh. “Gods, has he tried to interview the entire crew?”

“Relax, will you?” He looked after her as she began to pace in front of the windows. “Nobody’s talking to him. Especially not the senior officers. And without a few witness testimonies he’s got nothing but rumors and

speculation. Hardly enough to write a story anybody would take seriously."

She stopped and looked at him. "And you're certain of this?"

He nodded. "You may have had your troubles with the people on this ship in the past but they're a loyal bunch. They don't want to see one of their own get dragged through the mud by a reporter looking for another award."

She couldn't quite manage to keep a smile off her face. She hadn't expected this. But perhaps it shouldn't have come as such a big surprise. After all it had been Nora, the very same woman who had been something akin to her nemesis up until some months ago who had first warned her of what West was up to. And even Xylion, a typically pragmatic Vulcan who had gone as far as pointing out West's constitutional rights had been willing to help her scheme of denying West his story.

She shook her head, her smile now gone. "It doesn't matter. West is like a dog with a bone. I had Xylion block my file but that will only work as long as he's on board. It's only a question of time until he gets to the ugly truth about me and when he does I'm finished in Starfleet."

Katanga sighed. "Maybe that wasn't such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Because the harder you make it for him the harder he's going to push. Your making yourself appear guilty by trying to fight him and his story at every opportunity you get."

Star let herself fall back in her chair. "So what do you suggest? That I get him back in here and confess to everything? Tell him about all the stupid things I've done in my past life? Oh and while I'm at it perhaps I should also let him know that I'm a drug junkie who isn't really fit to wear the uniform."

"No." He shook his head. "I'm suggesting that you do nothing. Let him dig, let him ask questions and pretend that you don't care either way. You're not the first Starfleet officer with a questionable past but you cannot let that dictate the rest of your life."

She sighed heavily. She knew he was right. But then again even her old friend didn't know the full extend of the things she had done before she had come on *Eagle*. Some of those things she could explain away, some of them she could claim were orders she had to follow but others were simply impossible to rationalize, especially since she had been disavowed by her old bosses. No, it was much worse than that. They were after her.

They hadn't bothered sending somebody to silence her for good; instead they had counted on her to go away on her own. Self-destructing they had called it. With Atticus West's help she was well on her way to do just that.

## PART III THE OLIVE BRANCH

### 1

It turned out the information provided by the Thulians about possible pirate hiding spots was fairly accurate. It didn't take them long at all to track down a couple of *Hideki* escorts which promptly turned and ran when they spotted *Sacajawea* bearing down on them, aware that they didn't stand much of a chance against the larger and better armed Starfleet vessel. Mahoney had ordered a pursuit course and *Sacajawea* was slowly gaining on their prey.

"Distance to target?" Mahoney sat in his chair, slightly leaning forward, not unlike a predatory animal on the hunt.

"Four hundred thousand kilometers and closing," said Alendra from ops. "They cannot outrun us."

Mahoney nodded with a satisfied little smirk on his face. "Mister Hendricks, give us more power to the warp engines. I want to finish this quickly."

The young engineer turned from his bridge station. "It's already at maximum. I can't give you anything more unless we divert power from other systems."

"Take it from the shields."

"Sir." Leva glanced at his captain from the tactical board. "I would recommend against that course of action."

Mahoney swiveled his chair until he faced his executive and interim tactical officer. "Two outdated Cardassian escorts, Commander. We've been here before." His grin mirrored his confidence. "I know you can take 'em. We'll come in hot and firing just like we did before. They won't even know what hit them."

"I'm concerned about our ventral shields. We still haven't been able to fully restore that part of the grid."

"Noted." The captain swiveled to face forward again. "T'Sara, whatever you do, keep our belly away from those ships."

"Aye, sir."

"Happy, Commander?" He didn't glance back at Leva, the question had been entirely rhetorical and the matter was closed.

"Yes, sir." And yet he still wasn't entirely comfortable with the notion of taking a ship into battle with such an obvious handicap, but he also knew that the pirate vessels they were chasing weren't all too great of a challenge. Mahoney was right, in their last encounter they had easily trumped their enemy. There was no reason they wouldn't be successful again.

"Captain, they are dropping out of warp," said Alendra.

"Really? They want to make stand, huh? Follow their lead, T'Sara."

Unprompted by Mahoney, Leva sent another challenge to the escorts. They had attempted to hail both vessels at the beginning of the pursuit but he wanted to make doubly sure these pirates could not be convinced to give themselves up before it came to a fight. Not surprisingly the only response was silence. "Still no answer to our hails, sir."

"What is that?" Mahoney indicated towards the view screen.

Leva looked past him and at the viewer to find what had aroused his interest. It appeared the two pirate ships were heading straight towards a planet. Except it wasn't really a planet anymore. The massive globe had clearly split apart at some point in the past, cracked up along its equator and the two half spheres had slowly began to drift apart. In the process the space in-between as well as surrounding the former planet had been littered with asteroids and debris.

Leva frowned. "They may attempt to try and lose us in that asteroid field."

"Or perhaps it is their base." Mahoney seemed to like that notion. "Which would mean we could end it all right here and now."

Leva hoped he was wrong. If the pirate base was truly hidden somewhere among those asteroids or on what remained of that planetoid, chances were they had more ships lying in wait. "I recommend caution, Captain."

Mahoney nodded. "Agreed. Let's see if we cannot persuade them to change course. I want you to fire a full spread of torpedoes at the outer edges of the asteroid field. And make it big. I'd like them to feel the fireworks."

Leva couldn't help himself but grin, actually quite liking the plan. It took him only a moment to calibrate the launchers to the firing pattern

Mahoney had asked for. Once he had a solution he activated the sequence. "Firing torpedoes."

On the screen the bridge crew watched as half a dozen crimson antimatter projectiles were shot into space. All six entirely missed and overshot the two pirate vessels and Leva thought that their crews must have sighed in immense relief at what appeared to have been poor marksmanship. Instead the torpedoes tore into the asteroid belt with a vengeance, slamming into a number of large fragments which immediately erupted in massive explosions, blowing chunks of rock into every direction, including towards the fast approaching escorts seeking its now compromised cover. It was as spectacular sight of firepower and destruction.

"Nicely done, Commander."

And the pirates took notice as well as they promptly changed their heading, not only to avoid the incoming asteroid fragments turned missiles but also understanding that the safety of the split planet was no longer guaranteed.

"Give them one last chance to surrender."

Once again their offer fell onto deaf ears. "No takers, sir."

Instead, as *Sacajawea* drew nearer, the escorts opened fire.

The bridge shook slightly but Leva noticed that their shields were able to easily withstand the attack, even in their weakened state. T'Sara was doing her job at keeping their weakest area away from enemy weapon's fire.

"I believe we gave them every chance, what do you think, Commander?"

Leva nodded, feeling an undeniable urge building deep inside him. "I'd say they deserve whatever they've got coming."

Mahoney stood and faced his first officer. "Why, Commander, is that your Romulan side asserting itself?"

He answered with a predatory grin. Mahoney was right, he could feel a desire to mete out some punishment. Perhaps it was his Romulan side, or perhaps he was simply getting back into his element of being a tactical officer.

"Now that look is making me shudder." Mahoney's grin widened. "By all means, take them out."

Leva nodded and turned back to his controls. It was time to take off the gloves, he decided. After all he despised pirates who preyed on the

weak and defenseless just as much as Mahoney did. He also understood that the sooner they could deal with this threat, the sooner they could go back and return to completing their actual mission which Mahoney had delayed in order to clean up the sector. "Firing phasers."

He had often likened being in combat in open space to playing three-dimensional chess. It was all about putting yourself into the right position to strike and to deal the maximum amount of damage without sacrificing too much of it yourself. The aim was to hurt your enemy more than he could hurt you so that eventually they were forced to give up, run away or in some cases, if they were truly dedicated or perhaps desperate, until they were utterly destroyed.

Mahoney returned to his chair. "Keep firing at will."

As a tactical officer and while engaged in battle, that was probably his favorite order. Most commanding officers liked to take a very active role in the way a battle played out, giving orders in regards to maneuvers, firing positions and ordnance used. And some of them, like Owens for example, had enough of a tactical acumen to make such orders work most of the time.

But in truth Leva much preferred to be given a free hand instead and bring a ship's tactical systems to bear as he saw fit. This also meant that he practically took over the helm, by letting the pilot know exactly where he wanted her to steer the ship.

He had decided on a similar tactic they had employed before. Use plenty of firepower early on to discourage the enemy from putting up much of a fight in the first place. So as the two enemy ships bore down on *Sacajawea*, he opened up with every phaser array available and at maximum output, alternatively targeting both ships in an obvious attempt to quickly punch through their shields.

"Multiple direct hits." Alendra provided the commentary on the battle in progress while Leva focused on the combat itself. "Their shields are weakening."

"Excellent. Keep at it, Commander."

He had every intention to and fired a single photon torpedo at each target. The trick was not to fire too many at once. Against fast moving ships, it was acceptable to sacrifice a couple photons in order to achieve a greater objective.

Predictably the smaller ships saw the two torpedoes being flung their way and quickly altered course to avoid them. But Leva had expected this

and the moment he recognized which direction they had chosen to evade the incoming fire, he let go of the next salvo which had already been loaded into the launchers.

The enemy ships had no chance to avoid the next rounds which had been fired directly into their flight path.

Mahoney uttered an amused little laugh as he watched the spectacle on the screen. "Well done, Mister Leva."

"Their shields are collapsing."

Unfortunately Leva didn't anticipate their next move. Both ships quickly moved within hundreds of meters of *Sacajawea*, so close in fact, for a moment Leva feared they were on a suicide run. They changed course before it could come to that but they stayed close to the larger vessel, almost like a pair of suckerfish. At this short distance Leva could not use the torpedoes without causing disastrous damage to the *Sacajawea* and because they had to keep the ship moving, returning fire with phasers offered yet another challenge as the two vessels dropped in and out of their firing arcs.

Mahoney noticed something was wrong. "What the hell are they doing?"

"They're practically hugging our hull," said Alendra

He turned to regard his tactical officer. "Commander?"

Leva shook his head but didn't look up from his station. "It's not a very efficient tactic. At this range they cannot coordinate their attack to pose a serious danger to our shields but at the same time we can't deploy the full power of our own weapons."

"What are they up to?"

He didn't have an answer for that straight away. Perhaps the pirates would be able to land a lucky hit against their ventral shields eventually but for now the battle was pretty much at an impasse. With neither side having the tactical advantage, this could drag on for hours. Leva suddenly understood and whipped his head towards the captain. "They're trying to buy time."

Mahoney nodded. "For reinforcements to arrive."

He nodded.

"Shake them off now and take them out."

"We could overload and expand our shields, causing them to act like a pulse. It should push them far enough away to get a firing solution," said Leva. "But it would leave our shields severely depleted."

“Will you be able to take them out before they can resume their attack?”

Leva considered that for a moment. It was a big gamble but not impossible. “I can’t offer guarantees.”

“We’ll take the risk. Do it.”

He nodded and turned back to his station. “Hendricks, stand by to give me everything you have in auxiliary and engines for the shields.”

“You got it, Commander.”

The next move was the tricky part. The plan was to channel as much power as possible to the shield grid and then unleash them not unlike a shockwave which would extend into every direction at once and in theory push any object in *Sacajawea’s* immediate surroundings away from them. But it had to be done carefully and without blowing out the shield grid which would result in leaving the ship entirely defenseless and severely damaged.

“Initiating shield pulse.”

A sudden flash emanating from all around the ship seemed to prove that the gamble had worked. As were the images on the view screen of the two small ships tumbling end over end away from *Sacajawea*.

Mahoney smiled. “Target those ships and fire.”

Leva didn’t waste any time. “Firing torpedoes.”

The first ship didn’t stand a chance. The sudden impact with *Sacajawea’s* more powerful shields had caused its own to fail and without any protection the pirate vessel broke up unspectacularly under the barrage.

“One ship destroyed.” Alendra’s voice was filled with enthusiasm even if quite obviously nobody on that vessel had survived.

Leva didn’t have time to consider the casualties. Their shields had not entirely blown out but were now far too weak to protect them against a renewed attack. He had to act quickly to unload on the second vessel.

“Sir, I’m detecting new contacts.” The Bolian didn’t sound nearly as excited as she had mere moment ago. “Heading right for our position.”

Leva could see it too. The pirate reinforcements had arrived. Two more escorts had dropped out of warp nearby and were heading straight for the weakened *Sacajawea*.

“Commander, I really need you to pull out one of those ingenious Romulan schemes of yours right about now.”

He couldn't say he appreciated that comment but he understood the sentiment. The tables had turned quite dramatically and they had to act fast if they wanted to come out of this in one piece. Leva had to end this before it could go any further.

"Attack pattern kappa-eight." Leva activated the necessary panels. It was one of the most aggressive offensive maneuvers in the book, utilizing all available weapons to destroy or disable a target. It was usually employed as a desperate last effort but Leva knew that if those two newly arrived ships joined the fight now, *Sacajawea* would find itself in exactly that kind of situation.

He had the ship unleash phasers, photon torpedoes as well as a few of the more powerful quantum torpedoes. The incoming pirates likely hadn't expected quite that much firepower and desperately scrambled to evade the incoming salvos but unable to avoid them all.

"More direct hits. Heavy damage detected to enemy vessels "

"Keep doing what you're doing, Commander."

His preemptive attack on the newcomers had given the remaining original ship enough time to reestablish itself and Leva saw too late what it was up to.

The ship shook hard under the incoming fire which smashed right into *Sacajawea's* exposed underbelly. The weakened shields protecting that area collapsed within moments and the enemy phaser fire ripped into the hull.

"We've lost ventral shields, hull breach on deck eighteen," Alendra cried while she was forced to hang on tightly to her own console as she ship rocked hard.

Leva ignored the console which exploded next to him and the hot white shower of sparks hitting his face and uniform. Instead he returned fire instantly, managing to disable the ship before it could do any more damage.

One of the other ships came around in a high arc, unleashing its phasers as it passed the Starfleet ship and then grabbed its fellow vessel in a tractor beam before setting out on a course taking both of them away from *Sacajawea*. The third vessel joined them moments later. It was clear that they had decided on a tactical retreat.

"Set a pursuit course." Mahoney was not willing to give up on this battle now that they had them on the run.

T'Sara had the ship at full impulse again and hot on the pirates' heels within seconds.

Leva was getting a phaser lock. The three ships made for an easy target now. That was until all three went to warp and disappeared from his targeting scanners.

"Stay with them, Ensign."

But instead the lights cut out suddenly and one console after the next turned dark, including the tactical board.

"What the hell just happened?" The captain barked, sitting in almost complete darkness along with the rest of his bridge crew.

It took only a moment for emergency systems to kick in, bringing with it some illumination and enough power for essential consoles to light up again.

Hendricks turned to the captain, shaking his head. "That last hit took out our antimatter generators. The computer initiated an automated shutdown and ejection before it could trigger a cascade failure but it has left us with critically low amounts of antimatter."

Mahoney and everyone else on the bridge knew what that meant. Without antimatter or means to generate it, they could not power their warp engines or most other systems for very long.

Hendricks put a finer point to it. "We're dead in the water, sir."

Mahoney angrily beat the armrest of his chair with a clenched fist. But it was about the only thing he could do. *Sacajawea* would not be going anywhere soon under her own power.

Michael Owens hadn't slept well.

He had awoken at least twice in the middle of the night, plagued by images of men and women dying, fighting a war which was already won. Millions had already given their lives in the defense of the Alpha Quadrant and the notion that now that the Dominion was finally defeated, another person had to die for essentially no reason at all was simply anathema to him. And his subconscious mind, apparently, was determined to punish him for his failure to bring an end to the battle for Valeria quickly. Owens had no doubt it would continue to do so until the thousands of men and women on this world, both Federation and Cardassians alike, had put down their weapons and were on their way back to their homes.

He finally gave up on sleep a good few hours before sunrise and for a moment marveled again at the plush room he had slept in. As a commanding officer he had been given what had to be one of the embassy's largest and most comfortable guest rooms, usually reserved for visiting diplomats or official state guests of the ambassador. It was easily two times the size of his own quarters or comparable VIP accommodations on *Eagle* and differently to ship-based cabins designed by Starfleet engineers, these rooms had been constructed in a much more noticeable Earth-style. Like most of the embassy, this room seemed to have been based on opulent French Rococo interior design, complete with high ceilings, an elaborate chandelier and matching furniture.

The irony of it all didn't escape him. No doubt soldiers all over this planet were cramped together in tight barracks and makeshift accommodations while awaiting their next combat order while he got to stay here, sleeping in an oversized bed, decked out with satin sheets and fit for a king.

It only served to cement his resolve.

He quickly found the adjacent washroom, took a sonic shower and put on his uniform. Replicating a new one seemed out of the question since replicator rationing was still in effect even inside the embassy due to energy shortages.

A few doors down from his room he found an equally beautifully decorated and even more spacious sitting room.

The centerpiece of the room, hanging on the far wall opposite a row of tall windows was a large painting inside an intricate golden frame which immediately arrested the attention of anyone stepping inside. It was at least two meters wide and three meters high and depicted a group of men armed with muskets and sabers being led by a tall, bare-chested woman holding a flag of blue, white and red high over her head. The dead by their feet seemed to imply that they had been victorious and in the background, a city was emerging from the fog of battle.

*"Liberté, égalité, fraternité."*

Owens turned and saw Tevor Belore who had apparently already been in the room but whom he had clearly missed when he had first arrived, thanks to the domineering artwork. "I beg your pardon?"

The gul indicated towards the painting. "I believe that is the spirit which this particular piece of art is meant to invoke."

The captain couldn't quite hide his surprise. "You are familiar with this painting?"

"Oh yes, I've seen it a few times. I was stationed after all at the Cardassian embassy on Earth in Paris. I've seen the original on a number of occasions displayed in the Louvre." He joined Owens in front of the painting. *"Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix. One of the quintessential works of art celebrating the French Revolution."

"You're quite the student of Earth history." Owens continued admiring the painting, Belore joining him by his side. "Or a connoisseur of fine art perhaps?" He briefly glanced at the other man.

"A little bit of both, I like to think. And the French Revolution has always fascinated me."

"Really?"

Belore smirked. "Is it so difficult to believe that a Cardassian would show interest in human history, Captain?"

"No, not all. But I suppose I didn't expect a Cardassian to appreciate the French Revolution and its themes."

"You'd be surprised," he said. "Many of my fellow compatriots in important positions have studied this particular event in human history in close details. I believe they use it as a cautionary tale. On how not to treat the general masses in order to avoid a successful uprising and hold on to power."

Owens nodded. "I can see how one could use the lessons from the French Revolution that way. I very much doubt that's what the painter had in mind when he crafted this."

"I'm sure you are right, Captain."

Only a short while later they were joined by Major Wasco and then DeMara Deen.

"I see I'm not the only one who couldn't get any sleep." Deen stepped up next to Owens and Belore and in front of the painting. "Any doubts that the ambassador was a Frenchman?"

The captain shook his head. "Very few."

She took a moment to take in the masterful painting herself before she glanced at the captain. "I take it we have more important things to do today than admire fine art?"

Owens sighed heavily and then turned away. The French Revolution, he knew, had been a mostly justified struggle, certainly had started out that way with lofty ideals and ambitions. An oppressed people finally turning on their rich and indifferent rulers to escape their unrelenting yoke. It had taken the French a few more efforts before their battle cry of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité* had become a permanent reality. There was nothing justified about the war being waged on Valeria and he'd be damned if it took more than one attempt to bring it to an end. He considering all three members of the away team he had brought with him, never shy to allow others to contribute to finding a solution to the problems at hand. "Alright, where do we stand?"

Belore spoke up first as he sat down in one of the ornately decorated armchairs spread out in the room. "We have a Cardassian commander willing to consider a ceasefire."

"And a Starfleet general not prepared to do the same," added Deen.

Wasco shook his head. "I don't believe General Lam is unwilling to consider a ceasefire. He simply doesn't trust his Cardassian counterpart. It is an understandable reaction during war."

But Deen didn't agree. "If that were the case than no war would ever come to a conclusion. At some point all parties simply must be willing to show some trust if they are serious about peace or the fighting never ends." She glanced at Owens. "In my view the rewards outweigh the risks."

The captain considered Belore. "How much do you agree with General Lam's assessment that Gul Metral would exploit any talk of a ceasefire to potentially win Valeria for Cardassia?"

"I can't claim to know Metral personally but from all I've read, the man is a conventional military man who adheres to established rules of engagement. He does not strike me as the kind of man who uses subterfuge or trickery to achieve an objective."

Owens nodded. "I had the same impression."

"Sir, with all due respect," said Wasco. "You have only spoken to Gul Metral for a few short minutes and Gul Belore's knowledge is based on reports and hearsay. General Lam has fought this man for nearly two years. He is far more familiar with the tactics he would employ than any of us could claim."

Deen shot the Marine a look. "Couldn't it be that his view of Metral is clouded precisely because he has fought him for so long?"

"I don't believe that. Not General Lam. I cannot imagine a situation in which he would needlessly delay a possible peace and a chance to send his men home. Sure, the general cares a great deal about achieving his objective but never at the cost of his own men. Not unless there was absolutely no other way."

Nobody said anything to that and for a moment the room fell silent.

Then Owens turned to Wasco. "Major, clearly the general holds you in high esteem. I'd like for you to seek him out again this morning and talk to him. Try to find out what it would take for him to consider a ceasefire with the Cardassians. And in the quickest possible time frame. Our mission is to end the fighting. We're not here to escalate the conflict."

Wasco nodded curtly and then left the room.

Deen watched the Marine go before she turned to Owens. "Perhaps Lam is not the only man with a clouded perception."

"I've seen people talk like this before," said Belore. "In fact his way of thinking is preferred in the Cardassian military. It leads to blind loyalty to one's superior officer."

But Owens refused to believe this. "The major's loyalty is not in question here."

"Marines are a funny kind of people, Michael, and quite different from you and me," said Deen. "From what I understand they take loyalty very seriously and if it turns out to be to the wrong kind of person, that could be a very dangerous thing."

"I thought you were supposed to be the optimist here."

She didn't respond to that but she didn't have to. It wasn't the first time that he had taken note that the war had slowly but surely turned Deen into a realist. He hoped she was wrong on this occasion.

Any further consideration on that topic were preempted by the sound of an incoming call via the embassy's internal communications network. *"Captain Owens, you have an urgent incoming call from your ship."*

He looked up towards the ceiling from which the disembodied voice seemed to originate from. "This is Owens. Can you patch it through to my location?"

*"Yes, sir. There is a wall monitor in the room you are currently in. I'm sending the signal there now. Please note that due to interference the channel may be unstable."*

"Understood, Owens out."

He quickly realized that *Liberty Leading the People* had another function other than to simply adorn the room when the painting began to soundlessly slide aside to reveal a not much smaller wall-mounted screen behind it. The blue and white Federation seal displayed on the monitor disappeared to be replaced by an image of Tazla Star standing on *Eagle's* bridge. Just like it had when they had hailed the surface from orbit, the picture was unsteady and interrupted by distortion and static.

*"Captain, can you receive me?"* Her voice sounded a few light-years away.

"Just about, Commander."

*"Any progress, sir?"*

"Things have turned out to be more complicated than I anticipated. It may take a little while longer to convince Lam to agree to a ceasefire. He's convinced the Cardassians would exploit any draw down on his side."

Star nodded and Owens could tell that she wasn't all that surprised.

*"Anything we can do to assist?"*

He shook his head. "I don't see how. The general has asked me to transfer troops and materiel from *Eagle* but I have no intention of allowing that to happen."

*"Understood. We have received a distress signal a few minutes ago from a nearby Starfleet vessel requiring assistance in a neighboring sector."*

That took him by surprise. He had not been aware of other ships operating in proximity to Valeria. "Do you know the nature of their distress?"

The image and sound blinked out for a second or so but then returned. *"It seems to involve piracy but other than that we haven't received much more information."* She hesitated for a moment before going on. *"Would you like to return to the ship?"*

Owens thought he knew why she had paused. Even though he had given her more and more free reign over the past few months in carrying out her duties as first officer as she saw fit, he had always been close by. And he had certainly not let her take *Eagle* into a potentially hostile situation by herself. He realized that eventually he would have to. It might as well be now. *"No, Commander, you can handle this. Besides I'm going to be tied up here for a while. I'm not willing to leave until both parties have agreed to end hostilities and we have some form of armistice in place."*

Star didn't look all too comfortable at this and he wasn't sure if this was because she was concerned about answering the distress signal or because she'd have to leave him and the away team behind. *"Sir, I think you should know that the ship in distress is the Sacajawea."*

That shouldn't have changed anything. He knew of course that it was Star's former ship. The one which she had commanded for a short period before her fall from grace, court martial and demotion. He had a notion what a reunion with her old ship may have meant to her and suddenly understood her reticence. *"I have complete faith in your ability to handle whatever situation you are going to encounter, Commander."*

She nodded, somewhat gratefully at this implicit show of trust. *"We'll try to return as quickly as possible."*

*"No hurry, Commander. In fact Eagle's departure from this system for a while may actually help with our mission down here. Take your time."*

*"Very well,"* she said. *"Good luck, sir."*

*"And to you. Owens out."*

And with that she disappeared from the screen, once again to be replaced by the circular and wreath-adorned seal of the Federation. A moment later the painting slid back into place to hide the monitor altogether.

Deen looked at her captain. *"What do we do now?"*

Owens turned around to face her and Belore. *"We give Major Wasco an opportunity to get through to Lam."*

The Cardassian looked skeptical. *"And if that doesn't work?"*

“We’ll have to find another way to convince the general. A possible ceasefire on Valeria is too important as not to take a few risks in order to achieve it. And now with *Eagle* and her resources to escalate this war out of the picture, Lam won’t have much of a choice but to take a chance on peace.”

Cesar Wasco could read a room as well as anybody and he had no illusions that Captain Owens and the others had their doubts about not just General Lam but also of his own fierce attempts to defend him. Then again they weren't Marines. They couldn't possibly understand how people like him and Lam thought. They didn't understand that theirs was a life dedicated to loyalty, to total focus on a mission objective and of course, more than anything else, defending the Federation against all enemies.

Unlike people like Owens, Wasco and Lam had not been trained as diplomats or explorers. They were first and foremost warriors. And in a life of a warrior, dedication and loyalty were more than just high concepts. They formed an essential life style. It gave them an undeniable purpose.

Wasco harbored no ill feelings towards regular Starfleet personnel. In fact he admired Michael Owens' even-handed and calm command style quite a bit. It reminded him somewhat of a former commander of his. The very man they had come here to see. Of course that's where the similarities with the general ended. Owens wasn't a military man. He ran his ship and his people far more magnanimously than any Marine unit he had ever been part of. It could be seen in the way he had chosen his closest confidants. A formerly disgraced Starfleet captain acted as his first officer and a young woman who had clearly been raised a pacifist and sometimes appeared as delicate as an exotic flower often served as his chief advisor.

And while he held a certain respect for the fighting ethos of Cardassians, their loyalty and their dedication, it was obvious that Gul Belore, a man who had until recently been a diplomat, didn't truly exhibit any of those qualities.

In short it was not surprising that these people would not be able to fully understand what it meant to be a Marine and what made people like Lam truly tick.

Of course all this was perfectly fine with Wasco. He didn't need Owens and the others to understand. After all they all had their purpose in the greater scheme of things. And General Lam's purpose was to fight to defend the Federation, no matter the cost. Something he had excelled at over most of his career. Wasco was convinced that without people like Lam, Starfleet and the Federation would have been defeated by its enemies

a long time ago. He was an unsung hero who had put his life on the line again and again to defend what he held most dear. They didn't talk about men like Wasco and General Lam at dinner parties on Earth or Alpha Centauri, they didn't regard them as the last line of defense between their comfortable lives and the end of the freedoms they took so much for granted. Those people didn't show their gratitude to him and his ilk for being able to live the lives they so greatly enjoyed and Wasco wasn't bitter or angry about this fact. Marines didn't need thanks or recognition for doing their jobs.

He found the general in his office and just like Owens had guessed, Lam was immediately pleased to see him again, quickly ushering him in. "Cesar, I hope you've slept well."

"Yes, sir, thank you, General."

But Lam seemed to be able to see beyond those words. He offered a sly grin. "Bed a little too soft for you?"

The major smiled. "Not used to it."

Lam nodded. "Of course, I understand. We can always put you up in the barracks with the men if you prefer."

"I might consider that, sir. However we are not planning on staying very long."

Lam stood from his chair and filled two glasses with the yellow wine which had remained from the day before. He offered one to Wasco and they both sipped from their drinks.

"Just as I remember it."

"You were always fond of it, I recall."

Wasco nodded even though it wasn't entirely true. He had come to tolerate it but he wasn't overly fond of the bittersweet taste of the Chinese wine. Of course as a young officer when your mentor and superior offered you his favorite beverage, you accepted it without question. Wasco may have believed in honesty but he didn't see the harm in indulging a man of such accomplishments as Lam.

"I've been thinking. I could use a new XO around here. Most of the senior officers I have either lack experience or a indispensable running a forward operating command." He glanced at Wasco with expecting eyes. "What do you say?"

"You are aware I'm attached to Sixth Division?"

"General ch'Nek's outfit." Lam sat behind his desk and gestured for Wasco to do the same. "Don't worry, the old Andorian is a close friend of

mine and he knows he owes me. He won't have any trouble seeing you and your company join us here on Valeria."

"My company?" Wasco sat and put down his glass. "They are stationed on *Eagle*."

Lam waved him off. "Marines were ever only to serve on Starfleet ships during wartime. From what you and Captain Owens are telling me, the war is over. Which means so is your tour on *Eagle*."

Wasco nodded. "Yes, sir. But with the war over, why would you need my company here?"

The general leaned back in his chair. "You are starting to sound quite a bit like your captain."

"He has a mission, sir."

"He doesn't understand what is at stake."

"To be frank, sir, I'm not entirely sure I do either. Why not take a chance on a truth? You and your men have been fighting this war without pause for far longer than could be expected. Even Marines are not supposed to be deployed to a single theater for such a long period of time. You had no troop rotations, nobody on this planet has seen another sky in twenty-two months."

"Don't you think I know that?" He sounded unhappy but quickly got his blooming anger in check. "But trust me, a ceasefire would be exactly what Metral is hoping for in order to gain an advantage. Do you truly think he cares about the peace treaty?" Lam determinedly shook his head. "If you're right and if Cardassia is really hurting as badly as you make it out, Metral will want to do whatever he can to edge out at least a small victory out of this loss. Cardassia has had its eye on Valeria for decades. This is their opportunity."

"The Federation wouldn't let him keep it."

"The Federation won't care." Lam spoke forcefully now, with total conviction. "They haven't for some time. As far as they are concerned Valeria is a neutral world. They haven't sent me a single additional unit since the Dominion pulled out and if it had been up to the suits in Paris, we would have abandoned Valeria and left it to the Cardassians a long time ago."

Wasco considered that for a moment and came to the conclusion that Lam was probably exactly right on that point. After the high losses in the war, Starfleet was stretched to the breaking point, trying to support not just

its own war ravished worlds but Cardassians as well. It would spare little to no resources to assist Valeria.

“Do you know what happened to the last world the Federation abandoned to the Cardassians? I won’t let Valeria become another Bajor. Not while I can do something about it.”

“But is it our place to protect the Valerians?”

“It’s not just our place, Cesar, it’s our obligation. Not to mention what a Cardassian occupation of Valeria would mean in the big picture. Once they have a foothold here its only a matter of time until the Cardassians move on to worlds like Mariah IV and Fahleena. And after that they are just a stone’s throw away from key Federation worlds.”

There was a certain kind of logic to his argument but even Wasco had to admit that it seemed unlikely the Cardassians could make any such land grabs even if they could somehow hold on to Valeria. After all their military was a mere shadow of its former self since the Dominion had turned on them. Lam still saw the Cardassians as the same threat they had once posed during the height of the Border Wars. It wasn’t the same Cardassia anymore. Not after fighting a costly war with the Klingons and then being decimated when their so-called allies, the Dominion had turned on them in revenge for revolting against their leadership.

Lam could apparently see the doubt in Wasco’s eyes. “Don’t underestimate them, Cesar. We’ve done that mistake before and look where it led us. Even if they won’t be able to make such moves now, eventually they will. And in the meantime they’ll use their forces here to strip Valeria raw like they did with Bajor.”

“And you really think that a few dozen more Marines and a starship will be enough to turn the tide on Valeria and prevent all this?”

Lam nodded. “It won’t take much, Cesar. Not really. Our troop levels are almost identical and one starship and a few more fresh boots on the ground may be all we need to gain the advantage. With *Eagle* we’ll have an orbital weapon’s platform at our disposal, something the Cardassians have no access to. The threat of it alone could be enough to make Metral realize that he has no chance to holding on to Valeria.”

The major looked doubtful, already fully aware that Owens would never agree to use his ship in this manner.

Once again Lam seemed to know exactly what he was thinking. “It will be up to you to convince Captain Owens of the necessity of such

actions. I could order him to cooperate of course but this would all be much easier with his support."

"You're putting me into a difficult position, sir."

Lam nodded slowly. "I understand and I wish I didn't have to but too much is at stake here for us to do nothing. Surely you can see that."

For a moment neither man spoke as Wasco considered his options. Loyalty had never been an issue for him. If nothing else, as a Marine loyalty was a given. To your fellow man, to your superior and to the Federation. It was supposed to be at the core of what it meant to serve in the corps and it was supposed to be the simplest of all mandates, one that didn't need much consideration at all. Now he realized that this was perhaps not always the case. Certainly not here and not now.

"But perhaps you are right, Cesar." Lam offered a little and seemingly understanding smile. "You know Owens much better than I do. Even though I am convinced that I have met many of his type before. Starfleet captains tend to be idealists, men and women who are so desperate to do the right thing at all cost that sometimes it ends up being their greatest flaw."

"I am not sure if I would describe Captain Owens in that manner."

Lam nodded. "I agree with the captain in one regard. This war must end as quickly as possible. He has come here to make that happen and there is no reason that it won't."

"By turning *Eagle* into a weapon."

"Not necessarily. I mean, yes, that would be advantageous but the truth is this war will not be won by whoever has more men on the ground or who has more firepower in orbit. This war will be won by whoever has access to more consumable energy. In the past we tended to be fairly equal in this regard but lately we've been able to built up a slight edge and very soon, with *Eagle's* help, we will be able to truly press our advantage."

Wasco nodded. "The power plant you mentioned."

"Yes. It might not sound like much but the sooner we complete it, the sooner we will be able to engage in an offensive which will end this war for good. With us as the clear and undisputed victors. And with that victory we will not only secure the future of Valeria and prevent Cardassian oppression on this world, we will be able to stop any long-term plans the Union has on this sector of space and beyond it. Captain Owens and people like him in San Francisco and Paris are only thinking about the short-term implications. Their only concern is the end of the war and starting to mend

the damage and heal the wounds. I'm looking ahead, Cesar. I'm more interested in the bigger picture. And I know that this means that we will have to make some unpopular decisions now but I don't just want to end this war, I want to avoid us having to fight the next one. And I will need your help to make sure we won't have to."

Wasco had to give it to this man; he did tend to make convincing arguments. And who could possibly argue with the point that they had already paid such a high cost for fighting the Dominion War, that perhaps it wasn't enough to have won the war. Didn't they have a duty as well to do whatever they could to avoid having to go through such a devastating experience again?

Before he could consider what the general had said any further, a massive explosion rocked the building.

Both men jumped to their feet and turned towards the window. There, just a few hundred meters away, a large cloud of smoke was rising from behind a line of trees.

Lam immediately recognizing the location. "The main barracks."

"The Cardassians are already making a move?"

Lam frowned angrily as he headed towards the doors. "I told you they couldn't be trusted. This is exactly what I was afraid of. Instead of a ceasefire, all Metral is interested in is more violence, exploiting any chance to get the upper hand. And mark my words, this is only the beginning."

Against Deen's recommendation, Owens had immediately rushed out of the embassy and headed straight for the source of the explosion with her and Belore in close pursuit. He had of course understood her objection and without Nora around and Wasco otherwise engaged, he knew that she had probably felt it necessary to at least try and fill the role of his personal security guard. And she was no doubt quickly reminded that Owens had the terrible tendency to disregard advice pertaining to his own safety. An attribute he was sure he shared with a number of other modern Starfleet captains who had grown frustrated by being mollycoddled by first officers, security personnel and Starfleet regulations designed to keep them out of harm's way at all times.

But Owens had his reasons for his urgency to find out what had happened. Sure, he was willing to help out in any way he could even if he was certain that Lam's people were probably better equipped to do so. His main concern had to do with the fact that his mission had just become a great deal more difficult if the Cardassians were striking so close to Starfleet's command post, less than a day after he had arrived and advised Gul Metral of the end of the war.

It seemed to indicate that Metral never had any intention of seriously considering the truth Belore had proposed and that Lam had been absolutely right about his Cardassian counterpart and his warnings that he would exploit any talk of peace as an opportunity to escalate this conflict and perhaps even try to achieve a victory on Valeria for Cardassia.

As far as Owens was concerned, this was a worst-case scenario. It would firmly entrench Lam and his belief of having to face off Cardassian aggression and with his influence at Starfleet Command he might even be able to convince the powers that be that his motives were just and the continued war on Valeria a necessary sacrifice.

Owens was convinced that Starfleet would not send him any additional troops. If they hadn't cared for this seemingly insignificant battlefield at the height of the war, they certainly wouldn't care enough to send him more Marines now that the conflict had officially concluded. And of course there were no reinforcements to be had on the Cardassian side either.

He didn't even want to think of what kind of messy and endless war this status quo could turn into, with thousands of men and women fighting and dying needlessly and the innocent Valerian populace stuck in the middle of it all.

They reached the apparent source of the explosion after a good two to three minute sprint. It was obviously a Marines installation, judging by the signage, the high fences and guard posts. A large chunk of the eastern facing fence had been blown away and at least one out of perhaps six large and gray prefab buildings was on fire.

Owens heard Deen breathing hard behind him and turned to see her having bend over at the waist and resting her hands on top of her thighs. "You need to be in better shape."

She responded by giving him an evil eye.

Belore on the other hand seemed to have weathered their little run much better, even while wearing his heavy body armor. "Perhaps you better stay back."

But Belore just shook his head. "If you don't mind, I'd rather stick with you. A lone Cardassian loitering around here after an attack may not be a very healthy prospect."

Owens nodded and then headed towards what looked like barracks. As they came closer it quickly became obvious that they had been the target of the attack. There were at least a dozen men and women lying on the parade grounds outside the buildings and the first one he checked over seemed to be only dazed with minor and superficial injuries. He quickly noted that this seemed to be the case for most of the people outside.

A few, who must have been close to the building which had taken the brunt of the attack, were wandering around somewhat aimlessly and as if in shock. Medics and security personnel were trying to round up the injured while a number of armed Marines who had followed Owens and his away team from the embassy were beginning to secure the perimeter.

He had been concerned that the Marines would challenge him, being an outsider after all, or at least Belore, the sole Cardassian in their midst, but surprisingly nobody seemed to care or question their presence.

Deen had quickly recovered from their unexpected sprint and then not hesitated again to help with the injured where she could. Belore, even though being left alone by the Marines, wasn't quite willing to take the chance and remained at Owens' side.

"This does not appear to me like a military style attack."

Owens turned to look at the Cardassian. "How do you mean?"

Belore surveyed the scene closely and at first Owens wasn't sure what he was looking for. Then he pointed at the side of the building that was on fire and after a moment he could see it too. The sidewall had almost entirely collapsed along with part of the roof. And as the flames receded slightly, the aft part of some sort of freight vehicle became visible for a moment. Belore then pointed out the tire tracks the ground vehicle had left which were leading to the destroyed fence.

"An accident?"

Belore shook his head. "No, I've seen this kind of thing before. On Bajor. That vehicle was likely loaded up with explosives and purposefully driven into the building either by remote control or with a driver committing suicide in the process."

Owens didn't follow. "Why would the Cardassians employ guerrilla tactics against Starfleet?"

"It doesn't make much sense."

A loud commotion coming from the still intact main gate to the barracks caught his attention. A group of armed Marines seemed to be involved in some sort of standoff. When Owens approached he noticed that the Marines had stopped a few vehicles attempting to enter the barrack grounds, all of which with their cylindrical design and large rubber tires looked Valerian in origin. The largest one appeared to be some sort of fire suppression vehicle and the others looked very much like emergency ambulances.

"I won't tell you again. Remove your weapon and get on your knees. The rest of you, turn those things around and get out of here, we don't need your help."

Owens immediately recognized the lead Marine as well as the woman on which he had drawn a bead on with his phaser rifle.

"Sergeant, what's going on here?" He stepped up to the Andorian who was leading a unit of a dozen Marines, which had confronted the handful of Valerians who had exited their vehicles by the gate.

"These are the people responsible for this attack, sir." The Marine never took his eyes off the Valerian peace officer standing in front of her people. She was armed now but wisely kept her sidearm holstered. If it came to a firefight, she'd be entirely outnumbered and outgunned.

"The Valerians did this?"

“Yes, sir,” he said. “And I’ll bet gold-pressed latinum that that bitch knows all about it. We should’ve taken her in yesterday.”

“We just came here to help.” She took a very careful step towards them and Owens recognized the purple-haired woman from the day before. She still had a noticeable bruise on her forehead where she had taken a hit from the Marine’s rifle stock. “No need for the name calling.”

“You take one more step and I’ll blow that head right off your shoulders.”

“Sergeant, lower your weapon.”

“Sir, with all due –”

But Owens had no intention of going a few verbal rounds with the Marine. “Lower your weapon now, Sergeant, that’s a direct order. None of these people have made any hostile moves against us or this facility.”

The Andorian hesitated for a moment but then very slowly and begrudgingly followed the order just as he was trained to do. “Sir, do not trust these people. You’ve been on Valeria for less than twenty-one hours. You don’t understand what is going on here and who our enemies are.” He kept his eyes on the Valerians while he spoke, watching their every move.

“Do we require their assistance to put out the fire and see to the injured?”

“We take care of our own.”

Owens glanced at the Valerian peace officer.

The woman shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She indicated for her people to get back into their vehicles.

Owens stepped out of the gates but before he could make more than a few steps, he heard the Andorian Marine whispering to him urgently. “Sir, that woman should be taken in for questioning. You’d be a fool to trust any of these –”

He turned to face the man, cutting him off. “What’s your name, Marine?”

“Sergeant Thelos, sir.”

“Very well, Sergeant. I believe you and your unit are needed on the base. Many of your fellow men need urgent medical attention.”

Thelos hesitated once more but then fell in line again but not without leaving half a dozen men by the gate to secure the area.

“If it isn’t my noble Sky Knight again.” The woman watched Owens approach after having dealt with Thelos, casually leaning against her ground vehicle while the others were beginning to turn around to return

form whence they had come. "And what interesting company you keep. I don't think I've seen a Cardassian around these parts in years."

"Gul Belore." He introduced himself with a short nod.

"Sub-commissioner Sharval, Valerian Security Forces."

Owens and Belore stepped up to her. "We didn't get much of a chance to talk yesterday. I guess I keep finding myself in the unenviable position of having to apologize for the behavior of these men."

She smiled sweetly at him. "They're obviously not your men," she said. "Your with a starship?"

He nodded. "Yes. We arrived here to prepare both Starfleet and Cardassian troops to return home. The war has ended."

"You don't say. Who won?"

"The Dominion surrendered."

She nodded to that and seemed thoughtful for a moment. Then she focused back on him. "And how's your mission here going so far, Sky Knight?"

He frowned. "The name is Michael Owens. And it's not going very well to tell you the truth."

"Let me guess, Old Lam is not yet willing to give up on his master plans for Valeria."

"I was not aware that he had such plans."

Sharval stepped closer, much closer. In fact she moved right into his personal space until her face was mere inches from his and she placed the flat palm of her hand gently against his chest. She had done something similar when they had first met. He wasn't certain if this was a local custom or not but decided not to stop her. And if he was perfectly honest with himself, Sharval was an intriguing woman, physically as well as intellectually. "I'm fairly certain there is much you are not aware of here on Valeria."

"I think you may be right."

"Perhaps we could help each other."

"Perhaps. But first tell me something."

She looked right at him then and he was once again startled by how intense her blue eyes were.

"Is Sergeant Thelos right? Are Valerians responsible for this attack?"

She removed her hand and stepped away. "It is possible."

"Why?"

She didn't turn around when she spoke again. "Probably because they are fed up with having Starfleet and Cardassians use this planet as their private battleground."

Owens and Belore exchanged looks.

"I suppose that does make a certain amount of sense." The gul nodded slightly as he spoke. "I probably wouldn't be very pleased if two foreign powers had decided to use Cardassia as ground zero to settle their disputes."

Owens nodded and then regarded Sharval again who still had her back towards them. "Have you been able to determine who is responsible?"

She shrugged her shoulders and walked back to her vehicle. "Maybe I would if any of Lam's people would be willing to talk to me or cooperate in any manner." She activated the side door which quickly slid away to allow her entry.

Owens took a step towards her before she could slip back inside. "You said you might be able to help us with our mission."

She smirked again. "Perhaps, perhaps not."

"Let's get together and compare notes. How about you join us at the embassy?"

She quickly shook her head. "I'm not getting anywhere near that place unless I absolutely have to." She stepped into her vehicle. After a moment it powered up and it slowly rolled forward until the door was right next to Owens. The window rolled to the side to reveal Sharval sitting at the controls. "Meet me at the central square at midday." She shot him a last smirk. "We'll talk there." And then her vehicle sped off with its tires squeaking loudly which in turn drew the attention of the Marines who raised their rifles only to watch it shoot off into the opposite direction.

Owens looked after her for a moment.

Belore joined him. "A most curious individual, wouldn't you agree?"

He just nodded.

"Do you truly believe she may be able to assist us in getting Lam to consider a ceasefire?"

Owens turned to regard the Cardassian. "At this point I'm willing to try anything." He and Belore returned to the still smoldering barracks. The rain had picked up a little and seemed to have helped the Marines to put out the fire.

As he began to help the others with the injured, Owens wondered exactly how many more complications he would encounter on this planet which would threaten to make his seemingly simple mission of ending the last battle of the Dominion War ever more complicated.

“Will you try and relax already, you look as stiff as a corpse.”

That was easy for Katanga to say, Tazla Star thought as she sat in the captain’s chair on Eagle’s bridge, her eyes intently focused on the view screen which currently showed nothing but the stars they were seemingly racing past.

They had traveled at high warp towards the source of the distress signal they had received for nearly six hours and for the most part she had not left the bridge during that period.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” said the doctor. “Long range sensors have already confirmed that the ship is still in one piece, isn’t that right?”

Rachel Milestone swiveled her chair from operations to consider Katanga and nodded. “Yes, sir, the ship appears to be intact.” She looked at Star but when she found her unwilling to make eye contact, she turned back to her station.

“See, everything’s fine.”

Star offered a minuscule nod. In truth she wasn’t particularly concerned about the wellbeing of the Sacajawea. Not really. Usually former starship captains or those who had moved on to other vessels thought back fondly of their previous assignments. Not so Star. Not with Sacajawea. In fact she had hoped to go the rest of her life without ever having to come across that ship ever again. And after she had overcome the initial shock of receiving a distress signal from her former ship, she had secretly hoped that all help would come too late for them and that she’d be forever lost to the endless void of deep space.

She blushed slightly at the intensity and the unbecoming nature of her own thoughts and then quickly shook them off. There were dozens of people on that ship who did not deserve such a horrible fate and only a very few who most definitely did. Besides, she told herself, she was a Starfleet officer and the safety and wellbeing of her fellow men and women was one of her primary concerns. This went without saying. And yet as far as the Sacajawea was concerned, she had to keep reminding herself least she forgot.

“Taz?”

She forced herself to relax her shoulders a little bit and then looked at the man sitting next to her. She hadn't told him a great deal about his former command and other than the little information available on her file she doubted anybody on board knew much. She had told the captain some of it but that's as far as it went.

"Listen, don't worry, you'll do fine."

She nodded slightly, knowing what he was thinking. He believed the cause of her anxiety was because this marked the first time since she had been on Eagle that she had been put in command of the ship without the captain around. He knew how important it was to her to show Owens and everyone else for that matter that she could be counted on, especially when the going got tough. She had even admitted to him once over dinner that she wanted Owens to be proud of her. She wasn't entirely sure why but she couldn't deny that what the captain thought of her matter to her quite a bit. Perhaps because he had taken a chance on her when he didn't have to and when she'd had nowhere else to go. Katanga was only half right.

"I know," she said quietly. "I know."

"Then why do you look as if you've been invited to a cannibal's dinner party?"

That got a smirk onto her lips and she glanced at him. "Cannibal's dinner party? Where do you come up with those things?"

"If you have been around as long as I have and you've met as many strange alien races, sooner or later you come across a few oddities."

That caused chuckles from Milestone and Lif Culsten at the helm.

Her smile widened too. She wasn't sure if he was being serious or not, her symbiont was significantly older than even Katanga and as far as she could recall from its collective life experiences none of its former hosts had ever encountered such an occasion. But the doctor had achieved his objective as her much more relaxed posture and smile attested to. She regarded him with a grateful nod.

"We're now approaching the Sacajawea," said Lif Culsten.

Star's head whipped forward. "Red alert."

If anybody was surprised by her reaction, they kept it to themselves. There seemed little reason for the heightened alert level as sensors had not detected any ships in proximity to the other Starfleet vessel.

And yet the order was followed without hesitation as the light on the bridge was reduced and partly replaced by bright crimson strobes, the alert klaxons began their usual howl throughout the ship. Eagle's defensive

shields were raised and all her weapons put on full standby. She was ready for battle.

Star couldn't help herself but sound tense when she spoke, as if she was indeed taking the ship into combat. "Drop out of warp and put her on screen."

"She seems to be holding position near the remnants of a destroyed planet." Milestone looked up and towards the viewer. "Her shields and weapons are offline."

A planetoid which appeared to have broken up centuries ago could be seen prominently just beyond the Starfleet frigate. The two massive hemispheres had pushed away from each other as if the planet had been split in half like a coconut. A large field of small to large planetary fragments littered the space in between and all around that former world.

Star felt a cold shiver run up her spine when she spotted the familiar lines of her former ship. "Give me a status on her."

Xylion had a report ready. "There are currently two hundred five life signs on the Sacajawea. The outer hull is showing signs of multiple phaser impacts and the warp core is offline. Sensors are reading only trace amounts of antimatter on board."

Star nodded but said nothing else. She didn't order an end to the red alert or asked for a standard hail, didn't even give Culsten the order to bring Eagle alongside the fellow Starfleet ship.

In the absence of any orders the Krellonian at the helm used his initiative. "Assuming standard rendezvous position and coming to full stop."

Katanga looked at the Trill next to him. "Taz?"

"Huh?"

He pointed at the screen. "You want to, I don't know, do something?"

She nodded. "I suppose I should." She stood from her chair and took a few steps towards the main screen. She had dreaded this moment and desperately hoped to find a way to avoid it altogether. Now that was no longer possible.

But just before she could give the next order, Trinik spoke up. "We are being hailed."

She took a deep breath, hesitating for a moment. "Put it through."

The screen shifted to show a bridge she was quite familiar with. Smaller and more compact than the one she found herself on now. She

recognized that single chair at the very center. After all she had sat in it once, even if it had only been for a few months. But worse of all, she recognized the man sitting in it now. He was slimmer than she remembered him with shorter hair and he had grown a goatee. He had the rank insignia of a captain adorning the collar of his shirt but he still wore that same self-important expression. Recognition dawned on his face. "Tazla Star?" Captain Evan Mahoney was noticeably surprised.

She nodded but said nothing.

"I cannot believe it."

She couldn't tell if he was pleased or upset about seeing her again. She wasn't even sure if she had a preference.

A smile began to spread over his lips. "What a small galaxy we live in. Tazla Star as she lives and breathes. First officer, I take it?"

She nodded again.

"Where's your captain?"

"He's preoccupied with another mission. He sent us to assist you with whatever you require." She spoke quickly, not wanting to give him much of a chance to talk. "We've noticed that your main power is down and that you may have some problems with your antimatter generators. We can send over some temporary generators and an engineering team to help with repairs. With any luck you should be able to get underway again under your own power within a few hours."

His dark eyes seemed to bore themselves into her as she spoke. He didn't reply straight away and instead continued to consider her for a moment. "That sounds like a good idea. In the meantime and while repairs are underway, why don't you come over for a visit? It's been a long time and we're way overdue for a little reunion, wouldn't you agree?"

Star couldn't believe his audacity.

"And I'm sure there are quite a few people over here who would love to say hello as well."

"Thank you for the kind offer but I'm somewhat tied up here at the moment." She was putting on an obviously forced smile. "Perhaps some other time?"

"Not a problem, we'll come over and see you instead." He raised a hand before she could object again. "I insist, Commander. It's the decent thing to do, to offer my gratitude for your assistance in person."

Star fumed but there was little else she could do. How would it have looked if she had refused his request? He was a starship captain after all.

And she wasn't anymore. She nodded very slowly, doing a poor job of hiding her reluctance.

"Excellent, we'll beam over shortly."

She nodded and turned away from the screen, assuming the conversation was over.

"Oh, Commander?"

She stopped and turned to face him again. "Yes?"

"You might wish to drop your shields."

She shot him an empty look at first. "Yes, of course." She looked towards the Vulcan at the tactical station. "Lieutenant, stand down from red alert and lower the shields."

He acknowledged with a curt nod and within moments the normal light levels were restored, signaling the end of the heightened alert status.

"Excellent," said Mahoney. "We'll see you shortly. Sacajawea out."

And with that his face was gone, replaced by the image of his crippled ship surrounded by asteroids.

"Can't wait."

She felt Katanga stepping up to her and considering her curiously. "I believe you may have neglected telling me a few things about your history with that particular ship and her captain."

She sighed heavily. "I may have left out a couple of details."

With Lam too preoccupied with the aftermath of the bombing in which dozens of Marines had been injured but miraculously nobody had been killed, the general hadn't taken much interest in Owens' announcement that he intended to tour the capital city. He had however insisted that he take a four-man security detail with him, citing heightened tensions in the area after the attack.

What Lam didn't know of course was the fact that even though Owens found the various Valerian architectural styles quite intriguing, he had no intention of doing any sightseeing that afternoon. He was due to meet with Sharval, the local peace officer he had run into on two occasions since coming to Valeria, and he had decided against letting Lam know for now. Not that he would be able to keep it a secret for long with the heavily armed Marines coming along.

The rain had thankfully let up again and was back to a slow drizzle, even lighter than what it had been when he had first arrived. He was beginning to suspect that Valeria had more types of rain than stars visible in the night sky.

They had boarded a spacious, Starfleet-issue skimmer – beaming was not an option on Valeria he had since learned due to the omnipresent transporter scramblers – and after he had told his escort where he wanted to go, they promptly steered the craft towards the city's central square.

When they approached he found it much busier than the few other places he had seen in town, no doubt Sharval had chosen it for that reason. It was market day, apparently, and stalls had been erected all across the large, rectangular space surrounded by old and clearly historical buildings which must have had existed for centuries. Hundreds of Valerians were currently visiting the square, many browsing the wares and looking for deals.

Owens did not wish to draw too much attention, even if it quickly became apparent that it would be impossible not to. The gliding Starfleet skimmer stood out in the sparse Valerian traffic and a number of people on the square regarded it suspiciously as it approached.

He decided to ask the driver to keep going and leave the craft a couple of blocks away and then walk the rest of the way.

He wasn't as successful in getting the four Marines to stay with the vehicle however, their leader insisting that he had strict orders to keep close to Owens and the away team for security purposes. In the end he had no choice but to let them accompany him Deen, Wasco and Belore to their meeting.

Once they arrived at their destination, he still found it difficult not to garner the attention he had wanted to avoid. Belore of course stood out as likely the only Cardassian in town, Deen had never been a woman to simply blend into a crowd and the four dark-clad Marines didn't even make an attempt. They seemed slightly nervous and certainly uncomfortable at being surrounded by so many Valerians, almost as if they were traversing enemy territory. They were also not exactly subtle, shoving away anyone who stepped too close and drawing a bead on random people who seemed the slightest bit too curious even after Owens had asked them repeatedly to relax.

He couldn't blame them entirely for their cautious approach after he had learned that Valerians were likely responsible for attacking their barracks only some hours earlier.

Owens had no idea how to find Sharval among the masses of people who frequented the square. Fortunately he didn't have to wonder long as the woman found them.

"Sky Knight!" Her voice rung out across half the spacious square and causing a few bemused Valerians to stop and turn to consider him and his away team. Once she had his attention, she waved him over to what appeared to be a small outdoor establishment with tables and chairs, near one of the corners of the square.

"Did you really have to bring reinforcements?" She shot a frown towards the armed men escorting Owens and his party.

"Not my idea."

She nodded, seemingly willing to accept this for now and then pointed to a large table with enough chairs for her and the away team. Not enough, as it turned out, for the Marines.

Owens turned to the lead man. "Give us some room please, Corporal."

The human Marine frowned. "Sir, we have orders —"

"I know, I know. But you can keep an eye on us just as well from ten meters away." Owens spoke sternly, not taking no for an answer this time.

Reluctantly the Marines backed off and created a loose perimeter around the establishment. Owens and the others joined Sharval at the table underneath a large protective parasol which shielded the outside tables from the rain. She had already taken the liberty to order beverages for them. When Owens tasted the orange and crimson drink, he found it sweet and juicy with just a hint of an alcoholic kick.

"Very nice, thank you."

Sharval offered him a large smile.

He took one last look around the busy square. For a moment it almost felt as if he was sitting on one of those famous plazas in a place like Rome or Paris, surrounded by droves of tourists and locals. The surrounding architecture, much of it appearing ancient and imposing, clearly fit the bill and even the sun had decided to come out a little bit. The weather was pleasant, not too warm and not too cold. The drizzle took some getting used to but after a while he hardly noticed it anymore.

"So, Sky Knight, have you come to save us all?" She shot him a bemused look across the table and then took a sip from her beverage.

He frowned. "I'd much rather you called me by my actual name, Sharval."

She shrugged at that. "Human names are difficult for me to pronounce." She considered DeMara Deen next who had sat in the chair adjacent to hers. "My, you are a pretty one, aren't you?" The Valerian quite liberally reached out and touched her flowing golden locks. "I don't think I've ever seen hair this bright."

Deen, who after all was no stranger to the attention, did not object and smiled. "Thank you, I like your hair as well."

"You're not human, are you?"

She shook her head. "I'm Tenarian."

"I don't think I'm familiar with your people."

"Not many of us have ventured out into space."

She nodded and then let go of the bright golden locks. She looked at Owens and then back at Deen. "You wouldn't be his mate, would you?"

Owens nearly choked on his drink at her forwardness, not certain if it was a Valerian characteristic or if Sharval was just brutally honest. He also noticed Deen blush slightly. A very odd reaction from a woman who had since perfected the art of taking compliments on a regular basis and who was not easily fazed by such comments. He quickly shook his head. "We work together."

But Sharval wasn't buying it judging by her sharp almost skeptical look.

"We're friends," Deen said. "We've known each other for a long time."

Sharval beamed again. "Not that long." She considered the Tenarian with a knowing look. "You are practically still a child."

Before Deen could respond Owens spoke up. "Sharval, you said you might be able to help us with our mission."

Clearly sensing that Owens and Deen were not interested in pursuing her current topic of conversation she began to nod slowly. "I certainly hope so," she said. "Like many Valerians I would really be quite happy to see the Federation and the Cardassians take their disagreements elsewhere. We have no interest in your war. Besides, if what you say is true, and it is over, why go on?"

The Cardassian regarded her. He had not touched the drink in front of him. "What is it you would propose?"

She studied Belore for a moment. "Easy." She looked back at the captain, the large smirk back on her soft features. "Get one of those massive starships of yours, put everybody on it, and send them anywhere but here."

Owens sighed. "I'm afraid it's not quite that simple."

"Really? I thought you Starfleet types were all about making the impossible happen. Starfleet miracle engineers turning scrap into starships, Starfleet doctors defying death, Starfleet ingenuity conquering all." Her amusement at watching Owens' reaction to her words was not easily missed.

And he could tell she was making fun of them. He had never spent too much time considering how people outside of Starfleet and the Federation, those like Sharval who lived on neutral planets, thought about him and his people. He couldn't deny a certain truth to her words. Starfleet officers did have a tendency to believe they could move mountains relying on not much more than unwavering will and reliable technology and expertise. It had created a kind of mythos over the centuries which some were too quick to believe in, especially those serving in Starfleet themselves. He realized that for those outside of that circle this attitude often must have come across as a little haughty, perhaps even arrogant at times.

Belore however seemed to find this entertaining and couldn't hide his own smile as he considered the captain. No doubt he shared Sharval's skeptical view of Starfleet.

Owens had no defense to offer and decided against trying to come up with one. "There are currently approximately one hundred thousand Marines on this world and about as many Cardassians. We just don't have the resources right now to move so many people at once."

"Nonsense." She took another sip. "You might as well be honest about it. Your superiors on Earth simply do not care enough for a little neutral planet in unclaimed space a hundred light-years away to spare anybody."

He shot her a sharp look. "They spared me."

"Yes, my noble Sky Knight," she said, inviting another frown from Owens. "The very same who has to come to me to ask for my help."

"I believe, Madam, it was you who suggested this meeting," said Belore.

"I'm no madam but you're right, I did, didn't I?"

Owens was getting the distinct impression that they were not getting anywhere. "Other than your ingenious plan of getting everyone onto a very big ship, do you have any other bright ideas which could help us—both of us—to end this war on *your* planet?"

She uttered an amused laugh. "Is that sarcasm in your tone?" she said. "So you do have a sense of humor after all."

"He's known to tell a joke from time to time too." Deen had a hint of a smile playing on her lips.

Sharval looked at her before regarding the captain once more, leaning over the table a little bit. "Good." Her own smile widening. "I like a man who knows how to have a good time."

He simply glanced back at her with an empty look on his face, letting her know that he was still waiting for her to say something more substantial.

She understood the message and leaned back. "Look, all we care about is that you and your Cardassian friends pack up your things and leave us alone. That's not too much to ask for now, is it?"

"The government of Valeria would disagree with you." Wasco hadn't spoken until now, preferring to listen instead. "They seem to have an interest in a continued Federation presence on this world judging by the agreements they have signed."

Sharval shot him a dark scowl, clearly not liking the man at all. Or perhaps it was his Marine uniform. "You mean Heral?" She uttered a dismissive laugh.

Owens nodded. "Your supreme monarch signed a pledge of assistance with General Lam."

"Heral is a child and I don't mean like your pretty friend over here." She indicated towards Deen. "I mean literally. He has not yet reached the age of adulthood and is what you would call a symbolic leader. Nothing more. He wields no official power on Valeria. The chief magistrates make and enforce the laws, not the monarch."

The captain looked at Wasco and the others with a dumbfounded expression, realizing that if Sharval was right and if Supreme Monarch Heral was nothing more than a figurehead, and if he didn't really speak for the people of Valeria, any deal Lam had struck with him would have been inconsequential.

"When the Dominion and your people first got here, both sides went to Heral to secure support from us for your causes. I don't know if it was on purpose or if you were just ignorant about how things work on Valeria initially. Heral and his advisors like to think they are the ultimate authority even if they have no such guaranteed power under our laws. So while trying to please everyone and in an ill-fated attempt to keep civilians out of the conflict, he signed deals with both the Federation and the Dominion. Promising that my security forces would keep the civilians calm as long as you would ensure Valerians would not come to harm during this conflict of yours."

Deen looked as surprised as the others. "And I take it, it didn't work out that way."

"Maybe there was some restraint at the beginning but soon enough civilian casualties mounted and both Lam and Metral began to call it collateral damage and justified it as a necessity to ensure victory."

Deen looked at Owens. "No wonder the Valerians are angry."

He nodded. "It's a Prime Directive nightmare. We shouldn't be on this world in the first place. The only reason we ever came here it seems is because the Dominion once considered it to be of tactical importance and a possible incursion point into Federation space. And after it lost its significance it has turned into a real mess."

"General Lam's motives make a certain sense however." Wasco elaborated when Owens aimed a skeptical look his way. "You're right it is

a mess now but a Cardassian victory on Valeria could mean disaster for the Valerians. They could establish a permanent presence here and enslave the local populace like they did on Bajor.”

Belore shook his head decisively. “Cardassia has given up on such harsh and colonial policies a long time ago. We’ve learned from the disaster on Bajor. Besides, in our current state, we would not be able to support any kind of occupation.”

“In its current state perhaps not,” Wasco said. “But while the Dominion was still in charge, they may have had future plans for Valeria following a military victory.”

“I find that hard to believe.” Belore was still not convinced. “If there had been such plans why would the Dominion have essentially given up on winning a ground war on this planet and withdrawn the Jem’Hadar?”

“Gentlemen.” Owens inserted himself before the back and forth could continue. “Let’s agree that the circumstances have changed, for no other reason than that we are supposedly at peace now. I’m not interested in what may or may not have been on people’s agenda months ago. How do you we end this now?”

Wasco was not yet willing to give up this point entirely. “The general is still convinced that a Cardassian victory will pose a significant threat to the Valerian people.”

“Yes, he cares so much for us poor, helpless Valerians.” Sharval’s vicious smile on her lips seeped sarcasm.

“He shouldn’t,” said Belore. “I have been empowered to speak for the Cardassian transitional leadership and I guarantee that all we want is to bring our soldiers home so that they can assist in the rebuilding efforts.”

Owens quickly picked up on that. “Then that has to be our argument.”

Wasco shook his head. “I don’t think the general would be swayed by this.”

“It doesn’t matter if he agrees or not.” Deen looked at Sharval. “If we can get the Valerian officials, those with actual authority, to state that they wish for a withdrawal of all foreign troops, Lam would have to listen as there would be no continued legitimacy for Federation involvement here.”

“What about the Cardassians?” said Wasco. “What if Lam is right and they plan to stay?”

“It’s a risk I’m sure my people are willing to take.” Sharval’s statement invited the looks of everyone at the table. “Even if we can just

get Starfleet to stand down and leave, and even if the Cardassians don't go with them, at least this war will be over. That's better than what we have now. I can tell you that we'd rather take our chances with them than have this war go on for another day. Besides if the Bajorans could fight them off, so can we."

"It took them decades to force the Cardassians out and at a very high cost," said Wasco.

Belore shook his head again. "It won't come to that. As a representative of the Cardassian Union—what's left of it—I am willing to pledge no long-term Cardassian military interests on Valeria and an eventual withdrawal of all troops."

The Marine glared at the Cardassian. "That's a big promise."

The gul nodded. "And I'll keep it. As will my government." He looked at both Owens and Sharval. "You have my word."

"I'll take it. The Cardassian military no longer has the manpower to support an occupation and under the articles of the peace treaty is practically under Alliance control." He looked at the Valerian, fully aware it was their people who would take the greatest risk.

She considered everyone for a moment before she spoke. "I can get the local chief magistrate to draft an agreement. I know he thinks like I do and his fellow magistrates would not hesitate to put their names on any document which would lead to a withdrawal of foreign troops. The chief magistrates tend to be in regular contact so it shouldn't be difficult for everyone to sign it."

Owens nodded. "That's a good start but we'll need more than a piece of paper and a few signatures to convince Lam. We need to arrange a peace summit with at least one Valerian government representative who can speak for the people. Then we can lay out our plan to Lam and make a ceasefire a reality." He turned to look at Wasco. "Major, you're on good terms with the general, we'll need your help to ensure he agrees to hold this summit and most importantly, that he attends it himself."

He nodded without hesitation. "Yes, sir."

Owens considered Sharval next. "And you will need to convince your magistrate to join us."

Sharval offered Owens another large smirk. "Like giving orders, do you?" She waved him off before he could respond. "Don't worry, I can make that happen," she said. "I told you, Sky Knight. Getting together like this was a splendid idea."

Less than half an hour after they had spoken, she'd been given the word that Captain Mahoney had beamed on board. Star had decided to meet him alone in the observation lounge mostly because it was a much larger space than the ready room and she knew she wanted to keep as much distance to Mahoney as possible.

Sitting at the far end of the table, she took a deep breath when she heard the doors opening and then stood.

A crewman stepped in first, announcing her guests and then let Mahoney and his first officer enter.

Star noticed with some surprise that his XO was quite the familiar face. "Mister Leva?"

He nodded at her, offering a small smile. "Commander."

"Your new assignment is the *Sacajawea*?"

"Yes, sir." If he was perturbed over that fact he knew well how to hide this.

She gave him a nod and then glanced at Mahoney who wore his own little bemused smile. "Taz, so good to see you again in person. It's been far too long."

She was pretty certain he was lying.

Star noticed that both Mahoney and Leva had come onto *Eagle* with phasers strapped to their hips. It was standard procedure to be armed during times of war or during an extended conflict but the war was over. Of course some starship captains preferred to have their crew armed whenever they were on duty and after fighting the Dominion for nearly two years, Star was certain more commanding officers would err on the side of caution in that matter. On *Eagle* however it was not standard practice for the crew to be armed and it was considered common courtesy to leave your guns at home when you were invited on another Starfleet ship. Star had the strong feeling Mahoney had insisted on wearing phasers on purpose.

"Welcome on board." She kept her tone curt.

Mahoney looked around the otherwise empty room, obviously taking note that Star had decided to receive them alone. "Thank you, *Commander*."

He looked back at the Trill with a little grin to show that he had emphasized her rank on purpose. "We are extremely grateful that you were in the area and able to come to our assistance. I was not aware of other starships operating out here."

"Neither was I."

He nodded slowly and then pointed at the chair at his end of the table. "You mind?"

"Be my guest." Silently she was thankful he had decided to pick the seat farthest away from hers.

He took the chair and Leva sat next to him. Star could tell that the half-Romulan had not missed the sudden tension in the room and guessed that he had no knowledge of the bad blood between her and Mahoney. She decided that it was better that way as she took her own seat again.

"I take it you have been wondering what we've been doing out here." Mahoney's stupid little grin refused to leave his face.

"The thought had crossed my mind."

"Naturally," he said. "Are you familiar with the Thulians?"

She nodded. "Somewhat. The people of Ultima Thule, an important Federation trading partner in this sector but if I recall an otherwise mostly reclusive race."

"Reclusive is putting it mildly." He leaned back in the chair, making himself comfortable at the head of the table as if he owned the room. "We don't even know what they look like. They are humanoid but tend to hide their faces behind masks."

Star knew that that wasn't all that uncommon. A number of races had hang-ups over revealing their faces to outsiders. Some did it for cultural reasons, others because they didn't breathe the same atmosphere as humans and many other humanoids. The Breen, whose border was in this sector of space as well, were a good example, as were the Xelatians, who happened to be part of the Federation.

"Well, I'm happy to say that I've been able to make some inroads with the Thulians."

"Oh?"

"Since the war has ended they have been quite active in providing reconstruction resources to both Federation and Cardassian worlds most affected by the war. Unfortunately some elements in this sector are trying to profit from this goodwill gesture and have been attacking Thulian aid convoys, making off with their cargo. The Thulians have reached out to me

to help them fight this pirate scourge as they do not have the military capacity to do so on their own.”

“And that’s how your ship ended up disabled?” Star took perhaps a little bit too much pleasure from that fact.

Mahoney frowned but Leva answered in his stead. “I’m afraid so. We were chasing a small group of pirates to the broken planetoid when we fell into a trap.” He briefly glanced at his captain.

Star had the distinct feeling that there was more to that story.

“Regardless,” Mahoney said quickly, clearly wishing to move on. “Once our repairs are completed and you join our efforts, these pirates will not stand a chance. With *Eagle’s* help we will locate their base quickly and take it out of commission for good. I made the Thulians a promise and I intend to keep it. After all this could be our best chance we’ll ever have to lay the ground works for diplomatic relations with the Thulians. And after the war, we can use whatever allies we can get.”

But Star wasn’t convinced and judging by the somewhat uncomfortable look on Leva’s face, he wasn’t a hundred percent behind his captain on this one either.

Mahoney did notice Star’s reluctance. “These pirates are not just hurting the Thulians, they are hurting us as well as millions of Federation citizens and Cardassians who depend on these supplies to be able to rebuild their lives. I’m not willing to let a group of greedy lowlifes affect the fate of so many. Not after everything we’ve been through over the last two years.”

It wasn’t difficult to tell that he meant every word of it. Mahoney was a man with a mission.

“You and *Eagle* will assist us in dealing with this situation.” There was a certain finality to his voice. He saw himself in command now, not just of his own ship but of Star and *Eagle* as well.

She tried to consider her options. They had come here to answer a distress signal and assist a fellow starship vessel in need. Not to take part in on some sort of ad-hoc piracy suppression campaign. “My captain is expecting this ship back at Valeria.”

“Your captain will understand,” said Mahoney. “Besides, these pirates are mostly using outdated Cardassian escorts. We were blindsided by their ambush but now that we have you here that will not happen again. With our combined fire power we should be able to deal with them quickly and afterwards you can go back to wherever you need to be.”

Star didn't respond straight away.

Mahoney glanced at this first officer. "Mister Leva, would you mind giving us the room for a minute?"

The Romulan looked at him and then back at Star before nodding, getting out of his chair and then leaving the observation lounge.

A large grin came over Mahoney's face once he had left and he also stood. Much to Star's displeasure he was slowly making his way down the length of the table and towards her. "I thought it was about time that we had some privacy, don't you think?"

"What the hell do you want, Evan?" She quickly stood in order to be on equal footing with the man.

"That's *captain* to you, Taz." He grinned and then brushed his fingers over the four pips adorning the collar of his crimson uniform shirt.

"I cannot believe they actually promoted you?"

"*You* cannot believe?" His voice took on a harder edge. "And what kind of miracles did you pull out of your hat to get yourself out of prison and assigned as a first officer? You should still be rotting on Jaros II for what you've done."

Now she offered a little smile of her own. "I guess they made two mistakes then, didn't they?"

"Tell me something, Taz." He leaned casually against the windows of the lounge, facing her. "Does your captain know about the things you were up to on *Sacajawea*? Because for the life of me I could not imagine him wanting you around if he was fully aware of all the sordid little details."

"Some people change, Evan. I guess not you."

He considered her for a moment. "Oh, I've changed, Taz. I'm the captain now. And you? You're just the first officer. Funny how the universe has a tendency to put things on their head like that."

"I'm not going to help you with this little crusade of yours."

"Yes, you are, Taz." He moved from the windows to step closer, practically invading her private space. To her credit, she didn't flinch. "And you know why? Because I'm telling you to. Because I'm your superior officer now and I'm giving you a direct order. Oh wait, I forgot. You don't do well with orders, do you? You prefer to run off on your own and get the people under your command killed in the process."

She clenched her teeth tightly. "Starfleet regulations specify that the tactically superior vessel —"

He waved her off. "Maybe if you were the captain. But you're not. So you better get used to the idea that I'm in charge."

"Do you mind getting out of my face?"

He gave her another smile before he stepped away to give her some room. "You want another reason to do what I tell you?" He turned her way once more. "I mean other than you avoiding disobeying orders again and be thrown back into the dark hole you crawled out of? Do as I say or it will be my great pleasure to tell the whole galaxy exactly what you've been up to. And after I'm through with you, nobody will trust you ever again with as much as a garbage hauler."

She left it at scowling at him. It was one of those looks that she wished could kill.

He took a little breath of air. "It was almost just worth it for seeing that expression on your face."

Star ignored that jab. "Alright, I'll help you with this. But under one condition. You don't come back here. Not ever. And once this mission of yours is over we're through. For good."

He looked around the room. "What a shame, this is such a pretty ship." He shrugged. "We can hammer out the details of our combined efforts over comms. And remember to be civil around company, Taz. Nobody wants to see those pretty spots of yours distorted into a frown."

"Are you done?"

He regarded her closely, looking her up and down carefully. "You know, Taz, if only you had taken up my offer when you had the chance. We could have been great together and you could have saved yourself a lot of pain and headache."

"Sorry." A vicious little smile appeared on her lips. "I don't share my bed with scum."

He responded with a little grin of his own. "Now we both know that's not true."

"Get off my ship."

Mahoney didn't move straight away and then took his time to head towards the doors. He stopped short of stepping through them and instead regarded her with another glance. "Oh, and if you ever change your mind, you know where to find my quarters. I think they were yours once." He offered a last, almost lecherous grin and then left.

As soon as he was gone she released a heavy sigh she hadn't realize she had held back. The truth was she had come fairly close to punching

Mahoney in the face so hard that he would have needed Elijah's assistance to pick himself off the floor again. Of course Mahoney would probably have liked that. After all it would have marked the end for her and her career even if there was little doubt that he deserved it.

Star let herself fall back in the chair, starting to understand that it was in fact she who was getting pummeled. And the hits, she realized, just kept on coming.

He had been caught entirely unaware by the all too obvious animosity that had been present between his current and former superior officers when he had met Star along with Mahoney. They had both done an admirable job of trying to hide it, but Leva had been a security officer long enough to be able to read the subtle and in this case not so subtle indicators on people's faces. There was absolutely no love lost between those two.

Oddly Mahoney hadn't mentioned any of this before they had left for *Eagle*. Hadn't even told him that Tazla Star had commanded *Sacajawea* before him and that back then he had been Star's first officer. Odd because Leva had told him everything he had wanted to know about his former posting, including about Star herself. He had even pointed out that transporting over onto *Eagle* wearing phasers would probably not go over well. His captain had chosen to ignore that advice entirely.

"I think red really suits you. It makes you look important." Nora Laas wore a little grin on her face, sitting behind her desk in the security office. "You may have to be, seeing that you've apparently already gotten yourself into a fine mess here."

Even though it had been less than a week since he had been gone, Leva had decided to meet up with old friends while he was on *Eagle*, not sure when he would ever get another chance, and Nora had been pleasantly surprised to see him again, judging by the way her face had lit up when he had appeared by the open doors of her office.

"*Sacajawea*." She blew out some air. "Could you have landed on a worse ship?"

He frowned as he took the seat opposite her. "You're not helping."

"Sorry," she said. "But you must have known about her. She was Star's old ship, the one on which she went off the reservation and which directly led to her disgrace and imprisonment."

Leva nodded slowly. "I know. But to tell you the truth, it entirely slipped my mind. I remember reading about the incident, or at least the little bits that had been cleared by Starfleet back when it happened two years ago and then again when Star came on *Eagle*. For some reason I never made the connection when I got to *Sacajawea*. And that ship and its mostly

green crew have kept me so busy, I never bothered asking questions or read up on her full service history.”

She grinned. “I bet you wish you had before getting into that room.”

“No kidding. Those two do not like each other. I don’t know what happened after I left but I wouldn’t be surprised if I’d get called down to sickbay to pick up my captain.”

Nora chuckled.

“It’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny.”

“Not in my position, it isn’t.”

She nodded sympathetically. “So, any idea what the nature of the bad blood between those two could be?”

“Not really and I doubt either of them will open up to me. What we know from official records is that Star disobeyed orders during a mission to apprehend a fugitive and basically abandoned her ship to go after him by herself.”

“Something that may have gone over pretty badly with her first officer at the time.”

“I agree. But that doesn’t explain why Commander Star has such a problem with Mahoney.” He shook his head slightly. “No, something else is going on here.”

Nora leaned back in her chair as she regarded her friend, a smirk back on her lips “Regret leaving *Eagle* yet?”

He favored her with a scowl. “It’s not exactly what I expected. But I still like the challenge. She’s nothing like *Eagle* or even any other assignment I’ve ever had. And in a way that makes this very interesting. I have a real opportunity here to make my mark and help shape this crew into an efficient unit.”

“What’s Mahoney like?”

He didn’t respond to this straight away. He wasn’t sure how much he was comfortable telling her. Not because he had a desire to keep any secrets from her but because he understood what a terrible impression the truth would make. After all his own first impression had been anything but encouraging. But the man had changed suddenly. Now that he had a new purpose, he was almost like a man reborn. And he couldn’t deny that he felt a certain amount of loyalty towards him and *Sacajawea*. It was his ship, too, now. “He has some rough edges,” he said. “He and his crew have been through some tough times during the war.”

Nora's eyes darkened. "Haven't we all?"

"Yes but I think it was different for them. They had very little success and the crew suffered a great deal," he said. "Even more than we did." He added that last part quickly even though he knew that Nora had suffered greatly herself.

She nodded, clearly understanding sacrifice. And what it could do to a person.

"He seems competent enough. He doesn't have the experience or even the wisdom of Captain Owens but I think his heart is in the right place."

Nora nodded. "There is another but coming, isn't there?"

Leva sighed. She had a tendency to be able to read him like an open book at times. "He's also got a dark side. And it scares me a little bit."

Her eyes opened wider. "And this coming from you?"

He nodded. "It takes one to know one. I've been struggling with my dark side all my life," he said but then corrected himself. "My Romulan side. And sometimes I feel like it is just waiting to bubble over and take control. I think perhaps Mahoney is even closer to that edge."

She looked concerned. "I do not envy you." And yet she managed another smile. "Looks like you will have your work cut out for you. And if it's a challenge you wanted, you've really got one now. Good luck."

"You mean to the both of us."

Nora responded with a quizzical look.

"That's right, you haven't heard yet. Mahoney has drafted *Eagle* to help with our mission to chase down and eliminate the pirate activity in this sector. And he will be calling the shots."

"And Star agreed to this?"

"I believe she has."

Nora didn't hide her anger. "Damn her," she hissed. "Sometimes I can't help but question that woman's loyalty. We have places to be. The captain and Dee are practically stuck on Valeria all by themselves. We need to go back there as soon as possible. I think I'm going to have some words with my first officer."

Leva knew well of course of her past animosity towards Star. There weren't many on the ship who didn't. The two women had managed to get passed it and Nora had noticeably relaxed her attitude concerning Star over time. However, she sounded just like the Nora of old again.

She noticed his concern and offered a playful grin to alleviate it. "Don't worry, I promise to be civil."

Just then the intercom interrupted their conversation. "*Captain Mahoney to Commander Leva.*"

He exchanged a quick look with the Bajoran and then tapped his combadge. "This is Leva. Go ahead, sir"

*"Commander, may I ask where you are?"*

*"I'm still on Eagle, sir."*

There was a short pause. "*I see. Commander, I appreciate that you must have quite a few friends over there but may I remind you that you are my first officer now?*" His voice sounded sharper than Leva had been used to. "*I need you to be here, by my side. Do I make myself clear?*"

*"As crystal, sir. I'm heading back now."*

*"Excellent, Commander."* He sounded much more pleased now. "*I'm looking forward to having you back. Mahoney out.*"

Nora shot Leva a look, surprise and amusement mirrored on her face. "You didn't tell me he's a taskmaster."

He stood. "Well not usually. His encounter with Star must have put him in a bad mood."

*"Yeah, she can do that."*

*"I better get going before he sends a search party after me."*

*"Alright, you take care of yourself, So'."*

"And you as well." They exchanged smiles before he headed for the doors and left to return to the ship he now called home. For better or for worse.

Tazla Star was looking over the latest reports from *Sacajawea* and found that repairs to her antimatter generators were ahead of schedule, mostly thanks to Louise Hopkins lending her more inexperienced counterpart on the other ship both her hands. Her updated repair schedule estimated that *Sacajawea* would be shipshape and able to run on her own power again in less than three hours.

For Star repairs couldn't be completed quickly enough. The sooner they were done, the sooner they could finish Mahoney's mission of neutralizing the pirates and she could go back to Valeria and more importantly get out from under his thumb. And with any luck even get him out of her life for once and for all.

She looked up with a frown upon hearing the annunciator. The last thing she wanted at the moment was company.

And yet that didn't stop Elijah Katanga from apparently overriding the door controls and stepping inside.

She favored her old friend with a dark scowl. "There are certain rules on this ship even you should follow, Eli. One of them is never to enter the captain's ready room without being asked to enter."

"That rule doesn't apply when there is an emergency." He sat in the chair facing her and the desk.

"What emergency?"

"You tell me."

She sighed. "Eli, I'm really not in the mood."

"And I really don't care," he said bluntly. "We need to talk. About *Sacajawea* and about Mahoney and why we're still here instead of going back to Valeria where kids are continue to kill and die in the name of a war which is already over."

She leaned back in Owens' chair. "The captain asked me to take my time. He thinks that having *Eagle* in orbit is not going to help him convince General Lam to agree to a truth. He's not expecting us back for a while."

"Fine. But that still doesn't explain what's going on with you and that ship out there." He pointed to the viewport where the smaller frigate could be seen in front of the split planet.

"She's my old ship." She put on a lame smile. "You know how it is. Just like seeing your first love again."

He decisively shook his head. "You've known me long enough to know that you can't fool me that easily. I know about love. I even like to think that I felt it once or twice in my life. Now your feelings towards that ship and its captain have nothing to do with that. In fact, I think it's safe to say it's the exact opposite."

She stood and walked over the window to glance at the ship which she had once commanded. Her first and only captaincy which had lasted mere months and had come to a sudden and tragic end. She couldn't stand looking at her for long and turned back to Katanga whose eyes considered her appraisingly. "There are things I don't like to talk about, not even to you."

"That's not going to fly this time."

Her frown deepened.

"Oh, don't give me that look." He continued in a softer tone. "Listen, Taz, I'm worried about you, alright? I know things haven't been easy for you. On this ship and before. I know that you have struggled with adversity and animosity for a long time. And now you have this hack journalist gunning for you and the ghosts of your past are popping up again. For your own sake, you need somebody to confide in. And if isn't me then who?"

She sighed, once again realizing that he was absolutely correct. How was it, she wondered, that with all the lifetimes of experiences she had over him, he still turned out to be the wiser of them both. Then she remembered that she had never really benefited much from the wisdom of the Star symbiont, no matter how hard it had tried to remind her of it. She had always been too damn stubborn to listen to others. Perhaps it was time to change all that.

She took the seat again. "Mahoney and I have history."

"Yes, he was your first officer."

Star shook her head. "I wish that's all it was."

"Oh." Understanding dawned on his features. "Bad breakup?"

"Bad everything," she said. "I shouldn't have gotten involved with him in the first place. Not just because it was inappropriate but also because he had his own motives for wanting to be with me. And some of them had nothing to do with me at all."

"I suppose he wouldn't be the first who tried to sleep himself to the top."

"Yes but it was all so stupid and pointless. And I was so incredibly naive at first. Fell for his fake charm and everything when I should have known better. I broke it off after less than two weeks and he didn't take it very well."

"Okay, so the two of you were in a bad relationship. That happens. And it happened when? Two years ago?"

She confirmed that with a nod.

"Don't you think it's time for the both of you to move on? Why is there still so much animosity between the two of you?"

Star looked straight at her old friend, not really wanting to elaborate any further.

"There was more to it, wasn't there?"

"Before I left *Sacajawea* on my little unsanctioned excursion to apprehend the man we were after, I may have drugged Mahoney with Syndicate-Y."

At that Katanga's eyes opened wide. "You didn't?"

But she nodded. "Gave him more than a full dose. He's lucky he survived it."

"That's not good."

Fury reached into her eyes and her tone took on a sharp edge. "The bastard tried to blackmail me. He found out about my plans and came to see me just before I was due to leave. He threatened to stop me by going to my superior unless I agreed to rekindle our relationship and become his lover again."

The doctor didn't say anything straight away, instead he simply looked at her, regarding the Trill woman wordlessly.

"So perhaps I didn't make the right choice. In hindsight I should probably have backed down then and there but it wasn't that easy for me back then. I owed a lot of favors to people you can't just say no to. And frankly, Mahoney was just in my way. It would have been different if he had possessed the slightest shred of moral fiber in his bones. If he had been a good man and a loyal officer to me. But all he ever wanted was my body and whatever delusional ideas he had about advancing his career through my bed."

Katanga still needed a moment to respond. "That's a lot to take in."

"Hence why I didn't want to talk about it."

“Who else knows about all this?”

She shrugged. “I never told a soul,” she said. “Not sure about Mahoney. I would think that he would have wanted to keep this episode to himself as well. Maybe *Sacajawea*’s CMO Newheiser. After all he knew about my problem with Syndicate-Y and even tried to help once. As it turned out he was nothing more than another pawn of my ruthless former boss, possibly send to *Sacajawea* to keep an eye on me.”

“I’m starting to see why you have such strong feelings regarding that ship. Was there anybody on board with an ounce of decency?”

“There was the Ariolo security chief. His loyalty to me cost him his life.” She was unable to bare looking at Katanga any longer and diverted her eyes.

A maddening silence engulfed the ready room when neither Star nor Katanga had words to offer following her confession. She wasn’t sure what was going through his mind at that moment but she was convinced it wasn’t going to be good. When he had first come aboard he had been more than willing to offer her his seemingly unconditional absolution and that was before he even knew any of the terrible things she had done. And she could have easily gone on with the horror show which had been her life. Dragged out all the nasty little secrets of the things she had to do while she had worked for a shadowy part of Starfleet Intelligence only to realize much later that she had really only ever served the whims and personal agendas of a single man. She feared he’d never even look at her if he truly knew the full extent of her sins. She wasn’t even sure if he was still willing to do so now.

“I am not going to sit here and judge you for the things you’ve done in your past,” he finally said. “It is not my place. Besides, I like to think that I know your true character. I knew it back when I was friends with Dezwin and I’ve seen the same spirit and the same sense of self-sacrifice since I’ve come aboard *Eagle*. I cannot admit that I agree with the choices you have made in the past but as far as I’m concerned those have little bearing on the here and now. And as far as Captain Mahoney is concerned, from what you’ve told me, he’s a person much worse than you ever were in your darkest days. He’s a self-serving opportunist who does whatever he must in order to fulfill his personal desires regardless of who or what gets in his way. It sounds to me that whatever you did to him, he had it coming.”

Star glanced at her old friend, surprised by his continuously unwavering support of her. And once again she was not certain she deserved it. She didn't know how to respond.

"But I'm also going to tell you the same thing I've told you the other day. Don't let the mistakes of yours past dictate your future."

She sighed heavily. "That was easy to say when we were talking about just a reporter trying to get his next big story based on nothing more than rumors and hearsay. Mahoney can actually make good on his threats. He knows the sordid little details, hell he was there for many of them."

"That you drugged him while he was trying to take advantage of you?" He shook his head. "That's not going to reflect very well on him now, is it?"

She shrugged. "Maybe he doesn't care any more."

Katanga leaned forward. "Alright then, in that case you may have to make another difficult decision, Taz. Do you let this man control you for the rest of your life? Will you sacrifice the trust and the loyalty you have built so hard on this ship in order to hide your past mistakes or will you stand up to him even if that means that you risk your own career doing so?"

She had no immediate answer to those questions.

The veteran doctor leaned back in his chair. "To be honest, for the Star I know, this isn't really such a difficult decision at all."

A large, dark-blue Valerian land vehicle with big rubber tires rolled up to the barricades just outside the embassy and Owens watched with some displeasure as the Marines all around him brought up their weapons to track the ground vessel as soon as it had approached.

It came to a halt and the side door slid open to allow a middle-aged Valerian with dark long hair to step outside. He was a short man, Owens had at least half a head on him, but he carried himself with dignity, his chin up and his shoulders straight. Like many male Valerians he had a somewhat craggy face with large round nostrils positioned underneath his eyes, and flanking his high and prominent nasal ridge. He wore a long leather-like coat which fluttered slightly with the wind.

“Chief Magistrate Yoral.” Owens pressed his palm against his own chest which he had since learned was a traditional Valerian greeting gesture. “I am Captain Michael Owens from Starfleet. Thank you for coming.”

The smaller man looked up at Owens, then considered Deen at his side, his eyes widening for just a brief moment before noticing the armed Marine detachment just behind them. He glanced back at Owens. “Yes, yes, Sharval has spoken off you. You are the one who believes he can solve our dilemma.”

“I am certain that with your help we will.”

He puffed a little bit. “I’m a busy man, Captain. I’m chief magistrate for the entire southern region so you can imagine that I don’t have much time to waste on trivial matters and folly undertakings.”

Owens tried hard not to frown. “Sir, I do not believe any attempt to end this war to be either trivial nor folly.”

“Yes, yes,” he said again. “Fine. Let’s see if your actions are as convincing as you’d like your words to be.”

“This is Lieutenant Deen, she’ll escort you into the embassy.”

She stepped forward, repeating the greeting. “Chief Magistrate, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Her presence seemed to help lift his mood, albeit only slightly, and he mirrored the greeting for her, something he had not done for Owens.

“Yes, yes,” he said. “You are a quite pleasing individual. Now, let’s not waste any more time.”

She nodded. “This way, Chief Magistrate.” She pointed towards the entrance of the embassy. He puffed a little bit more and then set out.

Deen exchanged a quick look with her captain, making it obvious that she didn’t think even her natural charm would do much to make this man more agreeable, before she followed him.

They didn’t get all too far. The Marines insisted on checking the magistrate before he set foot into the building which included a scan as well as a manual pat down. Predictably the magistrate was not happy with this and he made his displeasure known, threatening to turn and leave on the spot. Only Deen’s soft reassurances seemed to keep him from putting up with the procedure. And only barely.

Owens didn’t follow straight away. Instead he glanced towards the vehicle. When nobody else emerged from it he walked up to it and looked inside to find Sharval in the plush passenger compartment. She was sitting way back in her seat with her feet up on another one, clearly having made herself comfortable. “Hello there, Sky Knight. One chief magistrate delivered as promised.” She wore that grin again which Owens had to admit was beginning to grow on him. Even if the nickname didn’t.

“Are you not coming?”

She shook her head. “I told you I’m not setting foot in there.” She indicated with her head towards the building behind him.

“Unless you absolutely have to.” He remembered her words. “You don’t think this qualifies? A chance of ending this war and getting rid of all us meddlesome aliens.”

Her smile widened. “They’re not all bad.” Sharval continued before he could say anything. “Besides, I’m not a diplomat. I leave that to you and Yoral.”

“Right,” he said. “By the way, you could have warned me about his general disposition.”

“I’m sure you’ll get along famously.” Another wide grin. “Good luck, you’re going to need it.” And with that she knocked against the side of the vehicle.

Owens had barely enough time to jump back as the door suddenly slid shut and the vehicle sped off. He shook his head slightly as he watched it disappear behind a corner. He turned and quickly headed into the embassy to follow Deen and the magistrate.

He found them in the large conference room he had chosen in which to hold the talks. Like most of the interior of the building, this one too was elaborately decorated with gold rimmed and red satin covered and cushioned chairs and a long wooden table adorned with golden legs. A huge crystal chandelier hung from the high ceiling and the walls were decorated with large paintings from Earth's classical period. The most famous of which was a replica of the *Oath of the Horatii* depicting three brothers and Roman soldiers pledging to their father while he held their swords above them.

Owens was sure the painting appealed to Lam for the sense of loyalty and dedication to one's country that it invoked. But Owens also remembered that the tale behind the painting was about the promise to end a war. For that reason it was strangely appropriate to their current situation. He hoped that differently to the events that were to follow the depiction in the painting, he could achieve this without further bloodshed.

Yoral showed little interest or appreciation of the foreign art surrounding him and seemed to fidget a little bit in his chair next to Deen. Opposite to him sat Gul Belore. One of Lam's administrative assistants sat in the corner and two lightly armed Marines guarded the door. They came to attention as soon as General Lam entered, followed by Major Wasco.

The flag officer regarded the room and its occupants for a brief moment before he found himself a chair at the most remote end of the table to sit down. Wasco took the chair next to him.

Owens would have preferred if Lam had taken a more central position but for now he was glad he had everyone in the same room.

"Thank you all for coming." Owens took a seat at the table and regarded the people in the room, especially Lam and Yoral who he noticed did not make eye contact with each other. "The purpose of us meeting here like this is to discuss the immediate future of Valeria. At least as far as the Starfleet and Cardassian presence is concerned. As you are all aware, the war between the Federation and the Dominion has ended and a peace treaty is now in effect between both powers as well as with the Cardassian Union which is no longer formally associated with the Dominion. I believe I speak for all of us when I say that our most important task now is to ensure an end to the ground war here on Valeria which has cost thousands of casualties on both sides as well as among the civilian population. Both Starfleet Marines and the Cardassian forces are urgently needed back home

to help our respective people rebuilt after the costly fallout which has devastated so many worlds.

While we do not currently have the resources to remove all the fighting forces on this planet and return them to their homes, we can and must prepare both sides for their imminent withdrawal. The best way to do this is to agree to an immediate ceasefire which will put an end to hostilities between all parties."

Lam glanced at Owens. "Captain, if I may?"

"Of course, General, please go ahead."

The Marine commander looked at the only Cardassian in the room, then briefly glanced at Yoral before looking back at Owens. "As the supreme commander of all Starfleet forces on Valeria I understand why I am part of your summit here but I cannot see Gul Metral anywhere. How do you hope to agree a ceasefire without his presence?"

Owens nodded slightly, admitting to the difficulty. He along with Sharval and Belore had tried to get in touch with the Cardassian officer again but with little success. Of course he doubted that even if they had been able to talk to Metral he would have agreed to enter deep into Federation controlled territory and sit down with him and Lam. Thankfully he was not entirely empty handed on this front. He looked at Yoral. "Chief Magistrate, perhaps you could tell us what you have been able to achieve regarding Gul Metral?"

The Valerian returned an empty look in response.

"I believe you had some success being able to communicate with Gul Metral." Owens hoped the clarification would prompt him to speak.

"Yes, yes." He spoke quickly and nodded. "However it was not me who spoke with him. I am in close contact with the other magistrates including the one responsible for the northern region in which Metral has his command post."

He stopped there as if he had explained everything. The room fell quiet and most eyes regarded the short Valerian.

Owens suppressed a sigh. "And?"

"And my counterpart has imparted to him that we are holding these talks with an interest to resolve the conflict. Metral has let him know that he would very much be interested in finding a solution himself."

The captain glanced back towards Lam but judging by the general's mien didn't find him convinced at all.

Belore noticed this as well. "And of course I am fully authorized to speak on the behalf of the Cardassian Union as well whose leaders are committed to ending the Valerian conflict and returning all troops to Cardassia."

Lam looked at the man suspiciously. "Forgive me, Gul Belore, but from all I have been told, there isn't much more of a Cardassian Union left. You expect me to believe that a man like you who seems to have been a senior military officer for a very brief time can speak for whatever is left of your government?"

"It pains me to say this, General, but we are now a conquered and occupied people," said Belore. "The terms of the Treaty of Bajor have put all Cardassian military decisions temporarily into the hands of your allied occupational authority. What is left of my people's civilian leadership, as transitional as it may be, supports all its decisions and those which would see remaining Cardassian troops being returned home."

"Spoken like a true diplomat." Lam sounded perhaps a little too dismissive, like a man who didn't much cared for that profession. He glanced back at Owens. "My concerns about a possible Cardassian overreach on Valeria, with or without the blessing of this Cardassian leadership Gul Belore speaks of, have not been assuaged, Captain."

"And I understand your position, General. However the Valerians are an independent people. As Federation representatives, whatever our own concerns may be, they have to be purely secondary to theirs." He offered the floor to Yoral but it turned out the man had to be prompted yet again. "Chief Magistrate, I believe you have brought a document."

"Yes, yes." He produced a data padd from his coat. The movement caused the Marines at the door to tense but thankfully that was all they did. He placed the slate onto the table and then slid it over so that Lam could consider it. "It contains a statement drafted on the behalf of the Valerian people and signed by myself and my fellow magistrates which declares that we wish for a withdrawal of all foreign troops from Valeria."

Lam looked the document over and then glanced up again. "And I assume you would expect us to make the first move?"

Owens shot Lam a sharp look. "Somebody has to, General."

He shook his head. "It would be a mistake and an invitation for Metral to take control of the rest of Valeria."

"That will not happen," said Belore.

“You don’t know that for certain and it’s a risk I am not comfortable taking. Even with the peace treaty in effect, what is to stop Metral to break with his people who as you say are already defeated elsewhere? With out us, Metral would have free reign to claim Valeria for himself.”

“General, this is simply not our decision to make.” Owens wasn’t afraid for his voice to take on a somewhat sharper edge now. “We have to respect the wishes of the Valerian people in this matter.” He shot Yoral an intense look to make sure he’d not miss his chance to make his point.

The man didn’t hesitate this time. “It is our wish for your troops to leave.” He managed to sound just as stern as Owens now. “We are willing to take the risk you have implied, however we are assured by Gul Belore as well as what we have learned from channels coming from Gul Metral, that the Cardassian troops have no intentions on staying on our world.”

Lam considered that for a moment. “The supreme monarch would disagree.”

“General, with all due respect, the deal you’ve made with the supreme monarch is not a binding one. He wields no legitimate political power on Valeria and I believe you know that.” Owens’ tone was becoming increasingly icy as he spoke. Perhaps it was not a good idea to push Lam too hard but Owens could tell that he had the military man on his back foot now, desperately trying to legitimize a war which couldn’t be legitimized.

“The risk is still too –”

“The risk is not ours, General.” Owens interrupted him. “You have already lost thousands of men in this war. Thousands more have perished on the Cardassian side and among the Valerian populace. It is our job now to put an end to the dying. Not one more person must lose their lives for a war which is already concluded.”

Lam glared at Owens. “And I will see to it that their deaths were not in vain.” Lam shot back with twice the intensity Owens had showed and forcing the room into silence once more. He was more settled when he spoke again, shaking his head slightly. “You may not see, Captain, but I know what’s going to happen here. I’ve seen this kind of thing before. Metral is not just going to give up, he too has lost too much to be able to convince himself to simply pack up and go home. No, he will see his people conquered and defeated and he’ll look at Valeria as his chance to make Cardassia strong again. Without us standing in his way, he’ll have no problem taking this world. And then one of two things is going to happen.

Either we let it be and watch silently as he slowly but surely burns this world to cinders like they did to Bajor, or the Federation will learn from its mistakes and ask us to come back here and take him out. And once we've lost our foothold on this planet it is going to cost us immensely more resources and blood to remove him from his entrenched position.

I am not willing to accept either of those scenarios and as such I say no to you, Captain. And I say no to you, Magistrate. Not because I enjoy war and suffering but because I want to prevent it."

Owens wasn't sure what he could possibly say at that point. Lam was absolutely convinced of the truth of his words that much was obvious. Even if it went against everything that he and the Federation were suppose to stand for. He didn't know if two years of uninterrupted warfare on a remote planet had changed General Lam or if he had always thought this way. He didn't know what it would take to make him change his mind. He didn't even know if it was possible. "General Lam, the Valerians do not want us here. Whatever consequences may arise from our withdrawal are not for us to ponder at this time. The Prime Directive specifically forbids us to get involved in their affairs."

"We are already involved, Captain. Can't you see that? We have been involved for two years. And we have died defending these people. I am not going to stop now just because it seems no longer convenient to do so."

Owens stood. "Convenient for whom, General? You or them?" Anger was now asserting itself in his tone. "You speak of your sacrifice on this world and I am truly sorry of the people you have lost here. But even you must see that this was never about Valeria. It cannot be about Valeria. This is and always has been about us and the Dominion. And we have all bled and suffered in that war. A war we have won, General. At a high cost. But you are making this personal."

Lam stood as well. "How dare you –"

"You are a Marine, are you not, General? You have your orders from Command. Stand down and prepare to return home. Follow you orders."

The two men, standing at opposite sides of the table and ignoring everyone else assembled in the room, were now staring daggers into each other, neither willing to back down from their position.

It appeared Lam gave in first as he took his seat again. He looked over the padd Yoral had given him. Then he placed it back on the table. Face down. "Captain Owens, you will immediately order your ship to transport to this location Echo Company currently stationed on your vessel

as I will take control of that unit and temporarily attach it to Second Regiment, Fourth Division. Further to this you will transport a number of engineers, building materials and replicators to assist in completion of a fusion energy plant."

Owens shook his head. "I'll be doing none of those things, General."

Lam shot the other man a sharp look. "In which case I am invoking Starfleet directive 175-b, subsection four, and take command of all Starfleet forces and vessels in this system in response to a direct and imminent threat to the Federation and its interests."

"There is no such threat and you know it."

Lam stood again and gestured to his assistant. "Lieutenant, make contact with *Eagle* and advise them that I am now in command and have them execute my orders at once."

The man nodded and stood, quickly heading towards the exit.

"Safe yourself the trip." Owens glanced back at the general. "*Eagle* wouldn't be able to follow that order even if they wanted to. She's no longer in orbit around Valeria."

Clearly this had come as a surprise to Lam, judging by the anger in his eyes. "You ordered your ship away from this planet while fully aware that I required its resources?"

"No," said Owens. "They are responding to a distress signal in a neighboring sector. But I have to say that after witnessing the clear overreach of your authority which you have displayed here today, I cannot say that I regret sending them away."

Lam was fuming. "Captain Owens, I am placing you under arrest."

"What?" Deen stood, total surprise evident on her features. "On what grounds?"

"For the willful obstruction of ongoing and essential Starfleet operations and for consorting with known enemies of the Federation." The general spoke without hesitation and then gestured for his guards who quickly took position at either side of the captain.

A tiny but humorless smile was beginning to tug at Owens' lips. He knew exactly what was coming next, suddenly understanding Lam's game perfectly. And he knew he was too late to stop it.

"You didn't really think I would miss that you were having private meetings with Sub-commissioner Sharval?"

"A Valerian peace officer."

"A suspected criminal."

"You never had any intention on taking this peace talk seriously, did you, General? You came here with only one intention. Getting me to support your private little war or if not, take command of my ship."

"You gave me no choice."

Yoral stood. "This, this is an outrage."

Not a moment later another, more heavily armed detachment of Marines entered.

"Sergeant Thelos, escort the captain to the detention complex. Lieutenant Deen, Gul Belore and Magistrate Yoral will keep him company there."

Yoral basically trembled with anger. "You cannot do this."

"On the contrary, Magistrate. I have the full cooperation of your supreme monarch to identify and detain any Valerians which pose a threat to Starfleet and Valerian interests alike. People like you."

Wasco left his chair now as well. "General, don't do this."

Lam turned to the other Marine. "You better start deciding whose side your on, Cesar. Remember who you are."

"I'm a Marine, sir."

Lam nodded. "Precisely. And you know as I do that sometimes we must make the hard choices. For the greater good."

Owens looked at Wasco and then back at Lam. "A great number of tyrants throughout history have used that very same rationale, General. Are you sure you want to be in that kind of company?"

"With time even you will understand, Captain, I'm sure of it." He glanced at the Andorian Marine who was leading the armed detachment. "Sergeant, please take them away."

Thelos nodded but couldn't quite hide a little smile, clearly enjoying that particular order after his previous run-ins with the Starfleet captain. He made sure to grab Owens' shoulder personally, a little harder than he needed to, and dragged him towards the door. "This way, *Captain*."

The other Marines quickly gathered Deen, Belore and Yoral and escorted them out of the door as well.

"I really hope I'm not a fool for thinking that getting us thrown into jail is all part of your great master plan here." Deen spoke quietly to Owens as they were being shackled outside the conference room and then led down the corridor.

Owens didn't respond to her. There was no point in letting her know that things had gone horribly wrong. Not that the evidence was not already firmly pointing that way anyhow.

He had to admit that he had always liked to see himself as somewhat savvy in diplomatic settings when he had to rely on nothing more than his wit and a strong argument to convince others to see things his way. This time he had lost control as well as some of his cool when facing Lam but then again he was no longer certain if there was an argument in existence strong enough to be able to cut through General Xiaogang Lam's absolute dedication to the course he had embarked upon.

Owens knew without a shadow of a doubt that if they could not find a way to change it soon, it would be thousands of innocent lives that would have to ultimately pay the price for his diplomatic failure.

## PART IV THE IMPROBABLE ALLIANCE

### 1

He hadn't immediately understood why Captain Mahoney had been so insisted that he returned to *Sacajawea* posthaste. After Leva had left Nora and beamed back to the other ship, he had found that repairs to the antimatter generators were still hours from completion even with Louise Hopkins' helping out. There was little to be done in the meantime and when he had tried to get in touch with the captain, he had actually found him unavailable.

It wasn't until an hour after his return from *Eagle* that Mahoney had made time to meet with his first officer. Leva had stepped out onto the bridge and just as he was about to head towards the ready room, those doors parted to allow a fairly familiar face to step out of Mahoney's office.

"Ah, Commander Leva. Small universe we live in, eh?"

"Appears that way." He wasn't fully able to hide his surprise at finding Atticus West, the war correspondent who had been imbedded with *Eagle* for the last few weeks on *Sacajawea*.

"I guess congratulations are in order. Just the other day you were merely a tactical officer and here we are."

"Yes." Leva considered the other man suspiciously. "Here we are indeed."

"Don't look so paranoid, Commander."

"May I ask what you are doing on this ship? I thought your assignment was on *Eagle*?"

He offered a little smile. "I'm not a Starfleet officer. I don't have to go where they tell me to go. I can move around as I please. In fact, often times, that's how you get the best angle for a story."

"Is that what you're doing here?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps. See it turns out not every Starfleet officer is as tight lipped as your friends on *Eagle*. Captain Mahoney is actually quite

a big supporter of the press, believes in transparency and all that. What a refreshing change.”

Leva took a step closer to the man and before ensuring nobody on the bridge was paying their conversation any undue attention. “Listen to me very carefully, Mister West. I may be first officer on this ship now but that doesn’t mean I don’t still have loyalty to my old crew. If you try to hurt them in any way, I would be extremely displeased.” His voice was cold as ice as he looked at the reporter. West was a tall and able looking man and yet Leva still managed to tower over him as he leaned in close.

And for a moment West actually flinched, taking half a step back, obviously not having expected such a strong tone from *Sacajawea’s* first officer standing in the middle of the bridge. No doubt thoughts of viciously brutal Romulans popped into his head. A race of people infamous after all at having mastered the art of finding ways to cause people substantial agony in subtle yet very efficient ways.

He recovered quickly enough, apparently remembering that Leva was still a Starfleet officer and then offered a wide smile as he stepped next to him, regarding him with a sidelong look. “Not the first nor the most terrifying threat anyone has ever leveled against me.”

Leva shook his head. “It’s not a threat.”

He padded Leva’s upper arm as if they were close friends. “You take care now, Commander. We may see each other again real soon.” He headed for the turbolift and disappeared inside.

“Sir, are you alright?”

Leva noticed that Alendra had stepped up to him after West had left, noticeable concern in the Bolian’s large eyes. “I’m fine, Lieutenant.”

She offered a nod and returned to her duties.

It wasn’t exactly the truth of course. He hated the idea that West was poking in one of his fellow officers’ past but what bothered him even more was that his own captain apparently had no scruples opening up to West about Star. Whatever disagreements the two may have had in the past, exposing a fellow Starfleet officer to the press was a clear violation of an unspoken rule. A serious breach of trust.

He took a deep breath and stepped up to the ready room doors. Mahoney begged him to enter after he had activated the annunciator.

The captain was standing behind his desk and for once the light was actually at normal levels instead of dimmed like the way he usually liked to keep it. He did have a bottle of scotch on the table along with two used

glasses. Mahoney and West had shared a drink. Leva didn't miss the fact that the captain had yet to offer him one, not that he was particularly fond of the beverage.

"Commander, it's good to have you back on board."

Leva nodded but said nothing.

"Repairs should be completed within the next couple of hours. I have spoken to Commander Star again and we have agreed on a joint approach to eliminate the pirate threat in this sector. As soon as *Sacajawea* is able to run under her own power again we will both shadow a few Thulian freighters in separate locations and wait for the pirates to make a move."

He nodded. "We'll ambush the pirates for a change."

"That's the idea. We'll try to take a crew prisoner and interrogate them as to the location of their base of operations and then put a stop to them for good."

"Appears to be a sound plan, sir."

Mahoney smirked as if he was quite pleased with himself. Considering the one sided conversation he'd had with Star when Leva had still been in the room, he wouldn't have been surprised if it was indeed Mahoney's plan. "I need you to get the crew ready. We're very likely going to see some more combat and this time I want the ship and crew to be up to the task."

"I'll run a number of combat drills."

Mahoney took his chair. "Good. I think that's all, Commander."

Leva turned towards the door but then stopped before leaving.

"Something else on your mind?"

The first officer faced Mahoney again. "I noticed Mister West came to see you."

Mahoney nodded slowly. "Yes, he did. A persistent fellow, but I like his tenacity. He's got a well-deserved reputation for exposing corruption and wrongdoing in high places."

"So I've heard," said Leva. "Is there something specific I should know about?"

Mahoney looked straight into his first officer's eyes, as if trying to see if there was something more behind them. Something left unspoken.

Leva stared right back.

Then Mahoney sighed heavily. "Take a seat, Commander."

He did so.

The captain leaned back in his chair. "How much do you know about Tazla Star? I mean, truly know about her."

"I know she disobeyed direct orders when she was the commander of this vessel. A court martial following those events found her guilty of being indirectly responsible for causing a number of deaths resulting from her actions. Most of the details of that mission and the court martial itself have been classified but she was demoted in rank and served time at the stockade afterwards."

"As you can imagine, I know quite a bit more than that." He considered the other man carefully. "I was her first officer at the time."

"And is that the reason you met with Atticus West? To discuss Star's past with him?"

He frowned. "Of course not. As you pointed out those details are classified and I would never share this kind of information with the press. And to be frank, I am disappointed you would even insinuate such a thing."

"I am merely trying to understand why you would meet with him in private."

Mahoney swiveled his chair slightly until he could see out of the viewport. Out there he could spot the larger *Nebula*-class cruiser holding position nearby. The subject of their discussion no doubt sitting on her bridge as they spoke. "Mister West has made it no secret that he is interested in writing a detailed article on Tazla Star and seeing as he had the opportunity to speak to her former first officer, on the very ship on which she fell in disgrace, it was simply a chance too tempting to pass up."

"You could have refused to see him."

The captain turned back to face Leva. "But then how would I have learned how much he already knows?"

"You're saying you met with him to protect her?" He did not look convinced.

Mahoney sighed again. "Look, I'm not going to sit here and pretend that Tazla and I are close personal friends. You were in that meeting, you could feel the tension in the room. We didn't part on the best of terms as you can imagine. She disobeyed orders."

He continued to regard him appraisingly.

"I'm going to tell you something which I hope you will take some time to consider carefully, So'Dan." He leaned a little closer and Leva realized that it had been the first time Mahoney had addressed him by his

given name. "I know that you still feel a certain loyalty for *Eagle* and her crew and I don't blame you. You wouldn't be a Starfleet officer if it were otherwise. But I know Tazla Star a lot better than you do. She does not possess the same sense of loyalty as you and me. Tazla Star looks out first and foremost for Tazla Star and that makes her a very dangerous person."

"And yet you agreed to work with her."

"I had little choice in the matter. We require *Eagle's* help with repairs but we also need them to help us take care of those pirates. As soon as this is done I'm going to be very relieved to part ways with her again."

"We'll have to work together to achieve this."

He nodded. "Of course. And I'm enough of a professional to put my personal feelings aside for the duration. I can only pray that she thinks the same way." He offered a worried frown. "Unfortunately after you left the meeting things only got worse and I am very concerned that she may not be able to do that."

"What are you suggesting?"

Mahoney stood again. "As I said, if we want to accomplish our mission we have little choice but to rely on *Eagle's* assistance. We'll need to work together. But I need you to be very careful around her. Work with *Eagle* but do not trust Star. It wouldn't be beneath her to somehow try and establish a rapport with you, counting on your loyalty to your old ship to get what she wants."

Leva also left his chair and offered a quizzical look in response. "And what is it she wants?"

He shrugged. "Hopefully nothing. But it doesn't hurt to be cautious, Commander. You understand, don't you?"

He nodded. "What does West know?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You mentioned that you wanted to find out what Mister West knew about Star."

"Oh, yes," he said. "Nothing of consequence thankfully and we want to keep it that way. Star may have her troubles but it is not our job to add to them now, is it?" He shot his first officer a meager little smile.

"Agreed."

"Good. I want you to keep in mind what I've said. Dismissed, Commander."

With that Leva turned and left the ready room. It weren't Mahoney's words which played on his mind after he had stepped back onto the

bridge. Instead he couldn't help think of what Nora Laas had told him. He had gotten himself into a fine mess indeed.

Tazla Star stepped onto the bridge causing Xylion to smoothly stand from the captain's chair to make room for her. "What do we have, Commander?"

"The probe's sensors have detected two *Hideki*-class starships on a direct intercept course with the Thulian freighter immediately outside this star system. They will be within weapon's range to assault the freighter in eight minutes and twelve seconds." Instead of heading for his science station at the back of the bridge, Xylion moved one chair to his right to occupy the seat usually reserved for the first officer. With Owens off the ship and with Star in command, he was filling in as her XO. It was a position he was quite familiar with, after all he had served as acting executive officer for a number of months and immediately before Star had come onboard.

She didn't take the center chair straight away but glanced towards the screen where she could see little more than the murky gray and blue haze of the class-VII gas giant's thermosphere which was currently serving as their hiding spot. Just before taking up that concealed position they had launched a number of small, inconspicuous probes to allow them to spy on the space lanes in the area which were frequented by the Thulians and which had attracted significant pirate activity over the last week.

Star couldn't deny that she was pleased that in order to have the best possible chance to intercept a pirate vessel, Mahoney had ordered both ships to operate quasi independently which meant she had not seen or heard from *Sacajawea* since they had set out on their hunt a few hours earlier.

Lif Culsten looked up from the helm. "We can intercept the pirate vessels within three minutes."

She shook her head. "Not yet. I don't want them to see us coming and give them an opportunity to run." She took the captain's chair in-between Xylion and Doctor Elijah Katanga.

Katanga glanced at her. "Let's not risk the lives of the people on that freighter."

"I won't."

But the doctor didn't look all too comforted by her icy tone or the way she kept her eyes focused on the view screen.

"I am advising *Sacajawea* of our situation." Xylion began to operate the small console to his right.

"Belay that, Commander."

The Vulcan stopped and turned to look at her. "I was under the impression that the mission details specified that we were to make contact with *Sacajawea* as soon as we were in position to engage a pirate vessel."

"They might pick up on the signal. I don't want to spook them."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "Using a low-band encrypted signal, it would be improbable the pirates will be able to detect or understand the nature of our communication."

"I just don't want to take the risk."

Katanga leaned closer towards Star.

She could tell he was concerned. "I know what I'm doing, Eli," she whispered.

"Are you sure?"

She gave him a curt nod, trying to mask the truth. Was she a hundred percent certain she knew what she was doing? No, she couldn't admit that much. Not to herself. She wasn't even sure why she was out here hunting pirates in the first place. But one thing she was certain about. She didn't want Mahoney anywhere nearby, and the longer she could keep him away the better.

And then there was another sensation slowly rising from the pit of her stomach and it took her a moment to realize that her nerves were to blame for it. She hadn't spent much time in the center seat of a starship after all. She had commanded *Sacajawea* for the better part of four months but hadn't seen a great deal of action during that time. And while she had sat in the chair a number of times since having become *Eagle's* XO a year earlier, truth be told she had never taken her into combat by herself. She had gotten used to sitting by her captain's side whenever things were about to get tense.

She smirked to herself when she remembered all those times having played second fiddle to Owens and desperately hoping for an opportunity to prove herself. And now that chance had finally arrived even if not exactly the way she had expected it. Regardless the circumstances that had brought her to this point, she was determined not to let her unexpected anxiety show. She was determined not to let it slow her down.

“Something amusing you?”

She glanced at Katanga, realizing that she had let something slip after all. She quickly wiped that smile off her face and shook her head. “Just imagining the look on their faces when they see us popping up.” She stood. “Time to intercept?”

“Less than four minutes until the pirates make contact with the freighter.” The beta-shift operations officer Lance Stanmore was keeping an eye on sensors and ship resources while DeMara Deen was away.

“Let’s time this right, people. I want to be right on top of those guys as soon as they get within spitting distance of that freighter.”

Culsten nodded. “In that case we should set out in forty-nine seconds.”

Katanga was still concerned. “We’re cutting it a bit close, don’t you think?”

“If they run we don’t achieve anything. I want to get this mission over with today.” She glanced at Lieutenant Trinik, the man who was now the chief tactical officer since Leva had moved on to *Sacajawea*. Star knew that Leva had trained him well and that he had proven himself on a few occasions during the war. He was young but efficient. His biggest handicap compared to the man who had been handling the weapons before him was probably the fact that he was nowhere near as creative as the half-Romulan had been. “Stand by to go to red alert. Make sure we limit our fire to their weapons and shields. We need to take prisoners.”

The man offered a curt nod in response.

“Commander.” Culsten turned to look at her. “This is it.”

She glanced forward. “Take us out.”

The Krellonian quickly worked his helm station and Star could see the screen beginning to change as the thick clouds of the gas giant’s atmosphere slowly receded like a veil being lifted. In no time at all, the view screen revealed the darkness of space interspersed with countless bright stars. *Eagle* made a sharp turn, shooting around the lavender-colored gas giant at high impulse and picked up even more speed thanks to gravity and the slingshot effect as it bore down towards the freighter in distress.

“Do we hail them?” said Katanga. “It’s only fair to give them a chance to surrender.”

But Star shook her head. “*Sacajawea’s* reports show that they had plenty of opportunities to do so. We’re not going to play nice any longer and not until we’ve wiped out their base.”

The veteran doctor frowned at her tone. "Don't you go Captain Ahab on me now, you hear?"

She turned to glance at him. "I'm not chasing a white whale, Eli. We're trying to put a stop to piracy and ensure people in need get the supplies they desperately require."

"Ever hear that saying about the road to hell?"

She shrugged. "I'm sure if I forget you'll be here to remind me."

"Bet on it."

Culsten couldn't hide a smile. "Coming into visual range now."

"On screen."

The two Cardassian ships appeared on the view screen, still traveling at warp. Star was quite familiar with the design, they had encountered these ships frequently during the war and they had turned out to be a real nuisance most of the time. Thankfully these ones weren't quite the same. Instead they were closer in ability to the ones the Cardassians had used during the Border Wars a couple of decades ago. Star was fairly certain that *Eagle* had a decisive advantage.

"Have they spotted us?"

"Unlikely," said Xylion. "These ships employ a highly focused sensor configuration when at warp. Unless they are actively scanning the surrounding space they will not be aware of our presence."

"One minute until contact," said the helmsman. "We should reach them about the same time as they reach the freighter."

Star nodded with satisfaction and then returned to her chair to sit down.

Katanga leaned slightly into her. "Would you calm down a little?"

She regarded him with a quizzical look. "I'm perfectly calm."

He shook his head. "Please, I've known you too long. You have that same look in your eyes that Dez used to get before neurosurgery."

"So? Dezwin was a phenom when it came to brain surgery."

"Yeah, that's what he liked to think."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Twenty seconds," Culsten said.

Star continued to glare at Katanga a moment longer but he clearly didn't seem interested to elaborate on the medical skills of her previous host and she turned back to focus on the more immediate situation instead.

"Red alert."

Trinik had the ship battle ready within a few moments, the flashing red lights and the ominous klaxon serving as unmistakable proof. "Shields are up. Weapons on full standby."

The screen changed to show the two nimble, amber-colored ships dropping out of warp close to the somewhat cylindrical shaped freighter.

"We are now within weapon's range." Xylion likely beat his fellow Vulcan at tactical to state the same by a heartbeat or so.

"Open fire on both vessels. Take out their shields and engines."

"Firing phasers."

On the screen the powerful beams of crimson phased energy struck the unprepared vessels head-on, causing the protective bubbles of their shields to flare brightly. They had most likely expected to find an easy target in the lightly armed and cumbersome freighter. Instead they were now facing one of Starfleet's most formidable starships.

Star couldn't help but smirk, actually wishing she truly could see their faces right about now.

"Pride goeth before the fall."

Star moaned. "Would you give it a rest showing off your knowledge of tiresome human proverbs?" She stood again, stepping closer to the view screen.

The two pirate ships had weathered *Eagle's* opening salvos and where now coming straight at them. They both spew their own weapons at the Starfleet ship but Star could hardly even feel the impacts of their phasers against the shields.

Trinik confirmed what Star had already suspected. "Minimal damage to forward shields."

She nodded. "Keep firing until their shields are down. Star to Transporter room three."

"This is Chow, go ahead, Commander."

"Chief, stand by to beam the crews of those ships directly to the brig as soon as their shields are down and you can get a lock."

"Will do, sir."

"Star to Nora, get ready to receive prisoners."

"We're all set up down here, Commander."

"Excellent, Star out." She never once had taken her eyes off the view screen and continued to watch as *Eagle* kept pounding both vessels with her superior phasers. "Status on those ships."

Stanmore had the report. "The lead vessel has minimal shields remaining. The second ship is still at half strength."

"Trinik, focus on the lead ship. We do not have to capture both crews."

Just then she spotted the second vessel turning back towards *Eagle* to make another pass. She wasn't too concerned. Their phasers had not proven much of challenge. That changed suddenly when she realized that they weren't firing phasers. Those were torpedoes and judging by their bright bluish tint, not the regular variety either.

The ensuing impact nearly flung her to the floor had she not grabbed the back off Stanmore's seat at the last moment. "What the seven hells was that?"

"Quantum torpedoes, sir. Direct hit to our forward shields which are down to seventy-eight percent."

"How did they get those?" She glanced at Xylion for answers. "Those ships are not supposed to have quantum torpedoes."

"They have likely upgraded their vessel recently."

"No kidding." Star made her way back to the captain's chair, suddenly not quite confident enough to stand in the middle of the bridge during combat. She noticed Katanga opening his mouth but she beat him to it, raising a finger in his direction. "Don't even say it."

He left it at a shrug instead.

"Mister Trinik, would you please respond in kind?"

"Firing quantum torpedoes."

But their effectiveness was discouraging when Star watched the small ship dodge all three projectiles and instead let go of more torpedoes of its own. This time she saw it coming. "Evasive maneuvers."

Culsten's reflexes were amongst the fastest of any man she had ever known but even he could not manage to avoid all four torpedoes heading their way. Two found their mark, causing the ship to lurch violently yet again.

Stanmore had to hold on tightly to his console to keep in his seat and then frowned when he read the damage report. "Forward shields down to fifty-one percent."

Star gritted her teeth. "Alright, I'm about done playing games with these guys. Mister Trinik, stop limiting your fire and take them out. Do whatever needs to be done short of destroying them."

And with that the tactical officer went to work unleashing the full power of *Eagle's* offensive arsenal almost like a wounded an angry animal lashing out with a vengeance against its opponents. And *Eagle's* vengeance was swift. Within moments the increased phaser fire had punched through the lead vessel's shields and leaving it very nearly adrift. Then they set their eyes on the second ship, the one which had dared to bring its big guns into this fight. A blanket bombardment of photon torpedoes almost crippled that vessel instantly.

This time Stanmore's news were much more encouraging. "Both ships are in retreat at high impulse, heading away from us and into opposite directions."

"Looks like they've lost their will to fight," Star said. "Mister Culsten, I want the lead vessel. Bring us into transporter range."

"Aye, sir."

It took *Eagle* less than a minute to catch up to the damaged vessel.

"I am detecting significant activity on the pirate ship, sir." Stanmore double-checked his board. "I think they're trying to get their warp engines up and running again."

"Not on my watch they're not. Activate a tractor beam."

Before they could jump to warp and make an attempt at an escape, *Eagle* shot out a powerful blue beam which lassoed the much smaller ship, holding it in place.

"Sir, the second vessel has aborted its escape vector and is now approaching us," said Trinik.

Katanga looked at Star. "They don't want to leave their friends behind."

"They're not going to have a say in the matter." She turned her head slightly so she could look over her shoulder and towards tactical. "Trinik, warn them off with torpedoes."

But the small escort was not deterred. It took one hit and managed to slalom around four other torpedoes before unleashing a couple quantum projectiles which were aimed at *Eagle's* bow and the very spot from which the blue tractor beam emanated from.

Star felt the impact in her bones.

This time Xylion provided the report. "Forward shields are down. We have taken damage to the tractor emitter."

On the screen, Star witnessed with frustration that the energy beam which had held the lead vessel in place fizzled out. "Transporter room,

lock on to the crew of the ship immediately in front of us and beam them over while our shields are still down." She watched with increasing vexation as the pirate vessel jumped to warp, its crew apparently having been able to get their engines back to work. The second ship followed closely behind but not before firing one last torpedo which penetrated the now non-existing forward shields and smashed right into the bright red Bussard collector at the very tip of *Eagle's* starboard warp nacelle.

This time the impact wasn't all that bad but Star could feel the entire superstructure rattling through her chair.

The operations manager shook his head in frustration. "Direct hit to our starboard warp nacelle with significant damage to the Bussard ramscoop."

But Star didn't care too much about that right then. "Transporter room, do we have the crew?"

There was no immediate response.

"Chow, talk to me."

*"Sorry, Commander. I only got one. He's in the brig now."*

She uttered a heavy sigh. "Bridge to engineering, how bad is it?"

The chief engineer was on the line with little delay. *"This is Hopkins, sir. The starboard Bussard collector took a direct hit. It's going to take a few days to have that fixed."*

"We don't need the ramscoop to go to warp."

*"No, sir, but the force of the impact has pushed the warp coils out of alignment which means we cannot create a stable warp field right now."*

Star massaged her forehead. "How long?"

*"My team and I should have them realigned within the hour."*

"Alright, get on that. Star out." She stood and headed directly for the turbolift. "I'm going to go and find out what unlucky sod is awaiting my fury in the brig."

Belying his age Katanga quickly jumped onto his feet and joined her before she could disappear inside the lift.

She pierced him with a sidelong look. "I don't need you holding my hand on this one."

"And yet I can't help feel that that is exactly what I should do."

\* \* \*

Star and Katanga found Nora Laas waiting for them outside the brig. She turned to the doctor first. "He does not appear to be injured."

"If you don't mind I'll be the judge of that."

The Bajoran nodded and led them both into *Eagle's* detention complex which featured a number of cells. Only one was currently active with an invisible force field keeping the sole prisoner confined.

"He's Valerian."

Star offered the security chief a surprised look and then stepped up in front of the cell to see for herself. Indeed the man sitting on the cot was unmistakably Valerian with his craggy face, a prominent ridge running over his nose and high into his brow, long purplish hair and two round nostrils under his eyes. He appeared to be middle aged which Star considered particularly lucky as it hopefully meant that he had been a ranking officer on the pirate vessel, perhaps even its captain.

"He hasn't spoken a word since we beamed him onboard." Nora took up position to Star's left.

Katanga had since retrieved a medkit and using the medical tricorder inside he scanned the prisoner. "Well, Lieutenant, it would seem your instincts were correct. Other than a few superficial scratches and cuts he is in good overall health."

Star focused on the man in the cell refusing to make eye contact. "I am Commander Tazla Star and you are on the Federation starship *Eagle*. We are holding you as a prisoner following your acts of piracy against cargo vessels in this sector."

He turned to look at the Trill. "Federation." He didn't sound particularly fond of that term, in fact he nearly spat the word. "This is neutral space, you have no jurisdiction here."

She shrugged. "Maybe not. But it also doesn't stop us from playing the role of Good Samaritan and protect those who cannot protect themselves. Besides you have wantonly attacked and damaged Federation starships. We don't take kindly to that."

"You fired first," he said angrily. "We merely defended ourselves."

Katanga grinned. "He's got you there."

She gave him a scolding look, letting him know that he wasn't helping, before she glanced towards the Valerian once more. "This time, yes we did. But you have already demonstrated your willingness to attack Starfleet vessels trying to protect the shipping lanes in this sector. So really,

it's you and your band of pirates who have escalated this matter. Now, that doesn't mean this has to all end in bloodshed. I am more than willing to discuss a peaceful solution. All you have to do is give us the location of your base of operations. We will dismantle your ships and take your ringleaders into custody but allow the rest of you to go free."

Instead he just turned away. "I'm not telling you a thing."

"You should really consider that offer. It's the best you're going to get. We have two ships looking for your base now which means sooner or later we will find it. And if you force our hand and needlessly drag this thing out, a lot of people are going to get hurt."

But he clearly wasn't interested in making a deal the way he kept his back to his jailers.

Star shot the security chief a brief glance. "Lower the force field."

Nora didn't hesitate and the barrier disappeared.

"What are you doing, Taz?" Katanga's tone was foreboding.

She didn't pay him any attention. "Wait here." She stepped into the cell.

This caused the pirate to actually turn around. "What is this?"

"You are going to talk to me, one way or another."

He shook his head. "I know your type. You are a Federation starship officer. You won't use force on a prisoner. You can't."

"Ordinarily you'd be right. But there is one thing you should probably know about me," she said as she stepped closer. "I wasn't always a starship officer."

He took a few steps back until the wall left him no further room for escape. His face turned into a mask of fear when he spotted those hard eyes focusing in on him. They spoke of something dark and sinister hiding behind them. Of a person willing to do whatever it takes to get what she wanted. A person not afraid to step over lines others would not dare cross.

"Taz."

She stopped then and turned to look at a concerned Elijah Katanga.

"Do you remember that road we talked about?"

Star turned back towards the frightened Valerian and then with a small sigh she let him be and turned to exit the cell. "Relax, I was just trying to scare him."

"Sure you were."

With a sudden cry the pirate had relocated his mettle and rushed towards Star who still had her back towards him, standing just outside his

cell. With the force field still down he had a real chance to get to her before she could defend herself.

The Trill turned around only to see Nora Laas quickly step into the cell and right towards the charging pirate. But she didn't reach for her phaser clipped to her waist. Instead she raised her arm and swung it out wide so that her biceps struck the man right under his neck even while he was charging at full speed.

The force of the hit cut out the feet underneath him just before gravity claimed him and pulled him onto his back, causing him to crash onto the floor of his cell with a loud thud.

Katanga was the first to react after that and quickly took a knee next to the fallen man, scanning his prone form with his tricorder. "You damn near crushed his trachea, Lieutenant."

She shrugged as she looked down. "Reflex."

"Well, next time, use your reflexes to stun him with your phaser instead." He applied a hypospray right to the side of his neck. "Much more merciful."

Star joined the doctor. "Will he be alright?"

The pirate gasped for air just then and Katanga nodded. "He's gonna be sore for a while but he'll live."

Star looked him over as he reached for his neck but clearly still far too dazed and hurt to do much more than that. Then she stood and turned to the security chief who didn't look particularly penitent over the actions she had taken. Star had no desire to reprimand her over them. "What do you make of the fact that he's Valerian?"

"Not all that odd. From what I understand Valerians are fairly common in this sector. No surprise the pirates would recruit amongst their ranks."

Star nodded in agreement.

"But we have to find a way to make him talk. And soon. The longer we are out here the longer we aren't able to support the captain if he needs us. And I'm not comfortable with that."

"Neither am I."

"So far I am less than impressed with both of your attempts to make this man cooperate with us." Katanga continued to monitor the prisoner. Then he looked up. "Both of you need to seriously reconsider your approach. And I want him moved to sickbay. At least until I'm satisfied that he is recovering."

Both women frowned at the idea.

Katanga stood and squared his shoulders. "I apologize, I don't believe I made myself clear. That was not a suggestion."

Star aimed her old friend a hard stare which did nothing to but cause the veteran doctor to stare right back, easily matching her intensity. She lost the impromptu contest of wills when she flinched first and shot a brief look at Nora. "Lieutenant, see to it please. But I want him under guard twenty-four seven." Then she turned on her heels and left the brig.

Owens, Deen, Belore and Chief Magistrate Yoral had been escorted to a nearby detention complex under surprisingly heavy guard. No less than twelve well-armed Marines had almost entirely surrounded their prisoners as they had been walked to their cell.

Owens found it to be an old-fashioned design, using doors, walls and bars instead of force fields, no doubt to save on energy which seemed to be in scarce supply on Valeria. The sparse cell contained just two cots as well as two hastily added thin sleeping mats and a small washroom alcove which afforded very little privacy. The room wasn't quite as sterilely clean as a brig on a starship but it wasn't exactly filthy either. It did contain a particularly bad and lingering smell however as if somebody had died in this place once and the odor had never been fully masked.

Deen headed for one of the cots as soon as the guards had locked the doors behind them and let herself fall down on it. "Put a note in your log, I'm officially changing my view on Lam." It was clear there was no way she could make herself comfortable on the utilitarian bed. "He's most definitely not the very model of modern major general."

"I'm not so sure." Owens had remained close to the sturdy doors to spy through the barred window to determine how many guards had been left behind. "If I'm not mistaken that particular character was meant as a mockery. If nothing else, General Lam is making a mockery of what it means to be dedicated to one's mission." He found that only two Marines had remained to guard their cell. But they stood entirely out of his reach while keeping a close eye on the door itself.

"I cannot believe I agreed to this ridiculous meeting." Yoral puffed angrily before turning to Owens. "And you and your ludicrous promises. You have achieved nothing but get me imprisoned, you fool."

The captain nodded slowly. "I admit I underestimated the lengths to which General Lam is willing to go to continue this war."

"Yes, yes, you certainly did that." The short Valerian was not appeased. "You greatly underestimated and see where your incompetence got us."

Deen stood and quickly came to her commanding officer's defense "That is not fair, Magistrate. The captain had the right intentions and the

stronger argument. He did everything he could to try and make Lam see the pointlessness of this war. How could we have known that he was so obsessed with Valeria?"

He considered the Tenarian for a moment as if to reconsider his next words. Turned out even her natural aura was not sufficient to calm him on this occasion. "You could have been here for the last two years to see first hand the madness unfold itself. But no, your Federation was never interested in what was happening on this planet. They didn't care that they had put a maniac in charge of their soldiers."

Owens did not feel like defending himself any further and went to sit down on the cot instead.

Deen was not so willing to concede. "The Federation had no idea that Lam had gotten this out of control. If they had known—"

"If they had known what would have happened then, huh?" he said. "Would they have stopped whatever else they were doing at the time, stopped fighting your mortal enemy and come here to protect us Valerians?" He smirked when he found her struggling to confirm this.

Her shoulders slumped visibly at having to admit the truth.

Yoral turned to find Owens again who had leaned back against the wall, seemingly staring at nothing. "If at least you had kept your starship in orbit we could have relied on their help now. I may not agree with General Lam on anything else but he was at least right about that. You should have never sent it away."

When Owens didn't respond Deen decided to jump in again, shaking her head. "It wouldn't have made much of a difference," she said. "With all the transporter and communications scramblers in effect on this planet *Eagle* would have had a hard time trying to free us. Besides, if she hadn't left there is a chance that General Lam would have managed to take her over and use her resources to help him fight this war."

"Yes, yes." He annoyance at the entire situation was still in evidence. "And maybe he would have managed to secure swift victory and the war would have ended in short order. This war must end, I do not care by what means."

"But I do." Owens looked straight at the magistrate now. "And I am not willing to be responsible for any more deaths on this world because of this war. Federation, Cardassian or Valerian."

"Very noble of you, Captain. But how precisely do you expect to accomplish this from within this cell?"

All eyes turned towards the starship captain, either skeptically or hopefully expecting some sort of plan that would see them prevail in their mission to put a stop to Lam against all odds.

"Wasco."

"You cannot be serious," said Yoral. "You mean the same man who stood by General Lam's side while we were being arrested? That's the best you can come up with?" Frustrated the magistrate turned away from Owens and the others. "We are all doomed."

"You have to admit, Captain," said Belore. "The major appears to be firmly in General Lam's camp. In fact I haven't heard him say one bad thing about that man ever since we got here. He's fiercely loyal and not a man who would turn against his own general."

"You are right, Gul Belore." Owens nodded. "He is fiercely loyal but Lam is not his general."

Deen stepped closer to her friend. "He's a Marine, Michael. Do you really think he'd turn against his own?"

"We're his own, too. He's our best chance to get out of here."

Before either Deen or Belore could respond, a loud explosion in very close proximity shook the room and forced everyone in the cell to cover their ears and fear for the ceiling to come crashing down on them as it began to rain small debris.

When his ears had stopped ringing, Owens thought he heard weapon's fire. He quickly jumped up and raced towards the door.

"Any chance Wasco would organize a jail break?" Deen was still holding on to one of her ears.

Owens shook his head. "No. This isn't him."

The two guards just outside had brought up their rifles but unfortunately for them they had turned the wrong way and before they realized that the assault was approaching them from the opposite direction it was already too late and they had been cut down by a number of phaser blasts. After that the corridor itself become almost eerily quiet except for the sounds of alarms blaring from somewhere nearby and weapon's fire being exchanged seemingly outside the complex.

A familiar face stepped right in front of the door and regarded Owens through the bars of the window. "Hello there, Sky Knight. I suggest you take a few steps back."

He didn't need to be told twice and quickly did as suggested, ushering everyone to the far corner of the cell.

A smaller explosion did short work of the door which collapsed inward with a cloud of smoke and dust. Before it had even settled, Sharval stepped through, holding a large phaser rifle. She had exchanged her security forces uniform for dark civilian attire.

"You are a sight for sore eyes, Captain." The magistrate glanced gratefully at the Valerian before shooting Owens a brief but smug look. "Looks like we don't need you or your kind to rescue us after all. Valerians will look out for themselves."

"Chief Magistrate." Sharval wasn't able to keep her own smile in check, apparently quite appreciating his words. "If you would like to follow me, I'll get you of this place."

"With pleasure." Without further delay he headed for the gap in the wall which had once contained a door.

Belore took a step to follow him. "What about us?"

Sharval considered the Cardassian and the two Starfleet officers, her phaser rifle, they noticed, still held up and ready to fire. "I'm really just here for the magistrate."

The Cardassian saw his chance and pressed it. "You leave us here and these Marines will capture us again in a matter of minutes. Help us get out of here. We could be valuable allies."

Owens however was not convinced. "That is not a good idea."

"With all due respect, Captain, but if it's between being at the mercy of General Lam and taking my chances with the Valerians, the choice isn't that hard. And I'm not holding out much hope that your major will be of much help either."

Sharval shrugged. "I suppose there might be a certain advantage in having you around." She looked straight at Owens. "All of you."

Belore took the invitation and joined her while Owens and Deen remained by the far wall.

Owens glanced at Deen but even she seemed to agree with Belore. "Not much we can do from within a cell."

Yoral was getting annoyed with all the delays. "Can we please leave now? If we stay any longer this whole breakout attempt would have been for nothing."

Owens finally nodded. "Very well." He stepped forward with Deen close behind.

Sharval graced him with a wide smile, then reached for her sidearm and tossed it to the starship captain who easily caught the weapon. "I knew you'd come along. Looks like we're going to have some fun."

"I have no intention of firing at my own people."

She shrugged. "We'll see, won't we?" Then she hurried out of the door with Yoral and Belore.

"Why do I have a feeling I'm going to regret this?" Owens glanced at Deen just before he rushed out of the cell to follow the others.

Outside they found a few more Valerians, similarly dressed to Sharval and also carrying phaser rifles.

"So, what's the plan?" He glanced her way. "We won't be able to just walk out of here."

"We're getting out just like we got in," she said. "No, getting out is not the problem. Staying out, that's the tricky part. Lam is not going to be very happy to hear about losing you and your friends, I'm sure. He's going to send half an army to come looking for us." She led the freed prisoners down the corridor.

Just as they turned around the corner they stopped suddenly when they found a single Marine standing in their way.

Owens was quick to recognize the man. "Major Wasco."

Wasco drew his phaser when he spotted the armed Valerians.

Sharval raised her rifle but Owens pushed it away as he took a step closer. "Major, what are you doing here?"

The man considered the group in front of him suspiciously, certainly not missing the fact that he was heavily outgunned. Owens may have kept Sharval from opening fire but the two other Valerians did not look as reluctant and they kept their aim.

"I've come to see you, sir," he said. "But it looks as if you've already made some other friends."

"Did you speak to Lam? Have you been able to convince him that he's wrong about all this?"

Wasco shook his head. "The general is not a man to easily change his mind." He kept his weapon trained on the Valerians even as he spoke.

Owens sighed at the dilemma. The notion of fighting the Marines was abhorrent to him. They were all on the same side after all. At least they had been during the war. And Owens had witnessed their strength, their bravery and their loyalty to him and his ship on more than one occasion over the last two years. He had never dreamed that he would have to one-

day turn against them. It was then that he understood an important distinction. He hadn't turned against Lam, Lam had turned against him and the rest of the Federation. And he had an army to back him up. An army, it seemed, which would follow him to the ends of the universe.

"If we're going to find a way to stop Lam we're going to need your help, Major," he said. "Come with us."

But there was obvious doubt in Cesar Wasco's eyes now.

"We don't have time for this." Sharval raised her rifle and before the Marine could take a bead on her, she fired, hitting him square in the chest and pushing him back into the wall.

"No!" Owens rushed to the fallen man's side.

Deen shot the woman a baleful look and pushed down the barrel of her rifle. "You didn't have to do that."

The Valerians freed her weapon easily enough but kept the muzzle pointed away from the fallen Marine. "I disagree."

Owens took a knee next to Wasco's unmoving body, trying to find a pulse.

Sharval stepped up next to him. "Calm down, Sky Knight. I just stunned him."

With relief he found a steady pulse on his neck and then stood, regarding her with dark eyes. "You could have told me."

"More dramatic that way." She offered an easy shrug. "Now, would you mind terribly if we get the hells out of this damned, forsaken place?"

Interrogating their prisoner hadn't gone very well. In fact he had not even volunteered his name and Katanga, showing off his dark humor, had taken to refer to him as John Doe while he was recovering in sickbay. To Star, the most frustrating part to all this had been the fact that she knew at least five different ways to make Doe sing like a bird. None of those of course were sanctioned by Starfleet and she had no interest in reverting back to her dark days or endanger the second chance she had been given. There were already more than enough people in her life who were actively trying to accomplish this and she was determined not give them any help.

At least one of them was on his way to meet *Eagle* at high warp. She had tried to keep information about their encounter with the pirates and detaining one of their number from *Sacajawea* as long as possible. If they had managed to make Doe talk, she wouldn't have hesitated to deal with the pirate base herself in order to resolve this mission quickly and spare herself any more encounters with her former first officer.

But when Mahoney had finally been in touch, demanding an update, she'd seen no other choice but to let him know what had transpired. Unsurprisingly he had not been pleased about her silence on the matter and immediately ordered her to rendezvous with his ship.

A soft chime from the tactical station on the bridge behind her interrupted her concentration and not a moment later Trinik offered his report. "Commander, we are being hailed by the *Sacajawea*?"

Star, sitting in the captain's chair, regarded Rachel Milestone instead, the young and petite woman who was presently in charge of operations. "How long to the rendezvous?"

"Less than thirty minutes, sir. She's really flying. Doing warp nine point five."

Star was hardly surprised. Mahoney had sounded furious when he had found out about her prisoner, or more precisely that she had failed of informing him of taking one straight away. Especially since he had not been able to accomplish a similar feat. And from her time on *Sacajawea* she understood that he was really pushing those engines.

Culsten turned to look at the first officer. "Would you like me to increase speed, sir?"

*Eagle* was doing warp six, a leisurely pace compared to the racing *Sacajawea*.

Star shook her head. "I'm not the one in a hurry." She was only telling a half-truth. Sure, she wanted to get this over with as soon as possible but she had no desire of setting new speed records while doing so. And if that annoyed Mahoney, so much the better.

The tactical officer spoke up again. "Commander, the *Sacajawea* is still hailing us."

Star suppressed a sigh. "Very well, Lieutenant. Put him on screen."

Mahoney still looked incensed. Perhaps more so now that she had kept him waiting. He stood on his bridge and in front of his own chair as if too agitated to consider sitting down. "*Commander Star, what took you so long?*"

She shrugged. "Just got to the bridge."

Culsten shot her a quick glance over his shoulder, probably surprised by the obvious lie.

Mahoney, judging by his skeptical look, didn't buy it either. He didn't dwell on it. "*You had strict instructions to advise me the moment you had made contact with an enemy vessel. I am gravely disappointed you failed to do so.*"

"We've discussed this already in private. Is there any point in rehashing this now other than to make my crew aware that you are not pleased with our efforts?"

He frowned deeply, not having expected Star to put him on the spot like this.

She kept a grin in check she felt coming on when she realized that she had been exactly right.

*Sacajawea's* captain decided to let it go and finally took a seat in his chair. "*We will rendezvous with you in twenty-seven minutes. As soon as we arrive I want you to beam over so that we may discuss the progress you have made.*"

Star's voice dropped noticeably. "We had an understanding."

"*I am aware.*" His grin spoke of little honest humor. "*And I have no intention on joining you on Eagle. I asked you to come and see me.*"

She scowled at him but that was really all she could do. She had told Mahoney that as her condition for her cooperation she didn't want to see him back on *Eagle* for the duration of this mission. She had expected this to mean that she didn't want to be in his proximity in any manner. He had clearly decided to use semantics to get around this and Star was hardly

surprised. But there was little point in objecting to this, especially not in front of the crew.

*"I'm sure you're looking forward to visit your old ship, Commander. No doubt it'll bring back memories."* His irritating grin remained on his features. *"Sacajawea out."*

She was left fuming after he had disappeared from the screen. She promptly got out of her chair and for once thankful Katanga wasn't on the bridge to see her like this. But she didn't care for anyone witnessing her sour mood and so she quickly headed for the turbolift. "Lieutenant Culsten, you have the bridge." She almost hissed her words just before slipping into the waiting car.

Not half an hour later, Tazla Star stepped foot onto a ship she had hoped she would never have to see from the inside again. And to make matters worse, a familiar face greeted her in the transporter room.

"Welcome back. It is just so good to see you again and you look really good. Healthy as well. I am so very pleased about this."

She stepped off the transporter platform. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Granted of course." *Sacajawea's* chief medical officer who was the only person in her welcoming committee considered her with what appeared to be a benevolent smile on his hawkish face. "There really is no need to stand on such formalities. After all we're all friends here, aren't we?"

"Sure," she said. "How have you been Doctor Newheiser?"

"Oh, just splendid. We have seen more than our share of losses during the war so you might find a lot of fresh blood on the ship. In fact, I believe the captain and myself are the only leftovers from your era."

"A very brief era."

"Brief but distinctive. And you must believe me that I am incredibly pleased to see that you have recovered so well from— shall we say, the challenges you have faced?"

She replied with her own little smile. Alan Newheiser probably knew more about those challenges than anybody else who had been onboard *Sacajawea* three years earlier. After all the man wasn't just a doctor. Just like she had done, he too had played a second and very much clandestine role on the ship and for all she knew he was still doing so now.

“And how is our mutual friend these days?” She was referring to the man she had once worked for and who was responsible for a number of things that had happened to her over the years. Most of them bad.

He didn’t answer straight away and instead regarded her carefully, no doubt trying to ascertain if she was attempting to fish for information. “There are some things not worth reminiscing about.”

She couldn’t help but agree even if he was clearly trying to evade the question.

“And how have you been, Commander? Any health problems I should be aware of?”

Newheiser was intimately familiar with her health situation and not just because he had been her doctor once.

“I’m doing fine.” She fell back to half-truths once more. But she had little desire to share details with him or to let on that she had started a rehabilitation regimen which sought to cure her from the very addiction his boss had once used to control her.

“Yes, I can see that.”

She was quickly tiring of this conversation. “I believe Mahoney is looking to speak to me.”

“Oh yes, of course.” He pointed towards the doors. “Quite eager to do so in fact. He’s waiting for you in his quarters. I’m sure you remember the way.”

But Star didn’t move. Not straight away. She shouldn’t have been surprised really and yet she couldn’t believe Mahoney’s audacity to decide to receive her there.

“Shall we?”

Star nodded and walked out of the transporter room.

Newheiser had remained right and she found her way easily. Even though this place had been her home for only four months and as such even *Eagle* was much more familiar to her by now, it was not a place she was likely ever going to forget. Her certitude in finding her way didn’t stop the doctor to stay with her.

He attempted some more conversation, clearly trying to pry out more information out of her, but ever mindful that whatever she might say could find its way back to people she had no desire to have much knowledge about her at all, she kept her responses very brief.

"Well, it has certainly been a great joy to see you again, Commander. Feel free to stop by sickbay anytime to catch up on old times." He regarded her once more once they had reached the doors to Mahoney's quarters.

She nodded even though knowing perfectly well that she would never set foot into his domain ever again. At least not willingly.

He responded with a parting nod and left her.

Star worked up the courage she knew she was going to need and then activated the door annunciator. Mahoney quickly asked her to come in and she stepped into the very room which had once been part of her own quarters.

Mahoney stood by the table and was in the process of pouring an amber colored beverage into two long glasses. He picked them both up and turned to his guest. "Commander Star." He held out one of the glasses. "I believe to remember that you were partial to Saurian brandy."

She didn't make a move.

"I hope you enjoyed seeing Doctor Newheiser again. I thought it might be nice if you were greeted by an old friend."

"It was an incredible gesture. Thank you for that."

He held up the glass again.

"I'm not thirsty."

Mahoney shrugged and instead emptied it with one large gulp before placing it back on the table. He kept hold of the second glass. "How does it feel to be back on your old ship, Taz? Does it bring back memories?"

"Will you cut the crap? Do you want my report or not?"

"What's the hurry?"

"I don't know, you tell me? I wasn't the one who nearly blew out my engines to make this rendezvous happen."

He considered her for a moment longer before stepping away and making use of the space of the large quarters. "It's been a while since you've been here so I guess you don't really know what this ship is capable of these days." He indicated towards his surroundings. "Do you like what I've done with the place?"

There wasn't much to see. Star had never had much of a chance to personalize her quarters while onboard and other than hanging a few vanilla paintings, he hadn't really done anything spectacular with it himself.

She was getting agitated. "What the hell do you want, Evan? You made me come all the way over here when I made it clear I didn't want to

be around you and now instead of talking business your forcing this small talk crap. It's in both our best interests to get on with things and get out of each others lives as quickly as possible."

He turned around then. "Is that so?"

Star regarded him with sharp eyes. It wasn't difficult to detect an ulterior motive in play.

"You want to know what I want, Taz?"

"More than anything." She did nothing to hide the sarcasm.

Mahoney stepped closer and held out the untouched beverage. "I want you to have a drink with me. Is that too much to ask for?"

Her hard eyes continued to stare daggers into him but when he didn't seem to back down she sighed and took the glass off his hand.

Smiling, Mahoney refilled the other one and then joined her again, holding it up in the air to make a toast. "To old times."

"Whatever." She took a small sip.

He watched her carefully and then followed suit. "Did you know that I recently made a new friend?"

She decided to let him keep talking.

"And he was actually traveling on your ship before."

Her eyes widened, not liking at all where this was going.

"Yes, he's a very interesting man. Famous even. You've probably read his work on that scandal in the Federation council a few years ago."

"Atticus West."

He nodded. "That's the fellow. The two of us had a terrific conversation. It turns out he is very interested in you, Taz. Not that I can blame him for that."

She put down her glass. "What did you tell him?"

He smirked with self-satisfaction. "The truth of course." He seemed to enjoy her rising anger. "That you were a terrific captain when you first came aboard three years ago. A little inexperienced perhaps at running a starship but that we complimented each other. That we made a really good team as long as it lasted."

"That's complete nonsense and you know it."

His eyes hardened. "Yeah, well, I wasn't quite ready to tell him about our more intimate relationship or how you eventually decided to drop me like a dead tribble. I didn't give him details about that little mission of yours that went so horribly wrong. Not yet that is."

She took a step closer. "You know that's classified. You could get yourself into a lot of trouble if –"

"Not nearly as much trouble as you'd find yourself in, I guess."

"Evan, I swear if you –"

"You do what?" His voice had taken such sudden volume she found herself at a loss for words. "What is it you think you can do if I try to tell the truth, Taz? Nothing, that's what." His tone normalized somewhat again and he took another gulp from his drink. He stepped closer to the Trill woman, forcing her to back paddle until she hit the bulkhead behind her.

She smirked when he kept coming. "Is this it? Is this what you want then? Back to your old ways of extorting me for your own perverse pleasures? You haven't changed a bit over the last few years, have you? You always wanted to be the captain and now that you are it seems to have made no impact on you whatsoever."

"Oh, I've changed, Taz, I've changed quite a bit and I've had plenty of time to think about things. Think about you." He placed his palm against the wall and right next to her head, practically trapping her in place with his outstretched arm.

"You've been thinking about me all this time?" An evil grin played on her lips. "I had no idea you had such a hard time getting over me."

"Don't flatter yourself."

"I can see it in your eyes, Evan. You still want me, don't you?" She began to unzip her jacket, noticing his eyes following her hand. "You still want this body" She didn't leave it at just the jacket and after a moment her crimson uniform shirt hung open as well to reveal a gray tank top. "Was it really that good for you or was it just the idea of sleeping with your captain that had you all excited?"

He reached out and touched her face, brushing a few loose strands of her fire red hair behind her ear. "Don't pretend you didn't enjoy yourself."

"I'll let you in on a little secret." She let him move a bit closer and watched as his other hand slowly reached out for her hip before she drove her balled fist right into his solar plexus. "You were as lousy a lover as you are a person."

"You bitch." He doubled over in pain but still managed to strike back viciously, hitting her right across her face.

Star had been hit worse but the pain still stung and the force of the impact nearly caused her to collapse to the floor. Instead she managed to

extricate herself from Mahoney and put some distance between them. He came after her with murder in his eyes.

"Don't do this." She slid across the table to keep it between them, knocking the bottle of Saurian brandy to the floor in the process. She had enjoyed hurting Mahoney but now realized that she had done herself no favors by baiting him like this. "We've both made mistakes. Let bygones be bygones."

He laughed out loudly. "Now you want to sue for peace? I don't think so. I am going to destroy you, Taz, and I'm going to enjoy every minute of it."

"Don't be stupid. You think this is going to hold any weight?" She kept moving around the table trying to stay away while he followed her. "All I'm doing is defending myself from your unwanted advances."

"I don't care how I have to do it. I don't care if I have to tell West and the entire galaxy every last detail about that mission. I don't care if I get thrown out of the fleet for this, hell, Command wants me out anyway. But I won't stop until they strip you of your rank and uniform and they throw you back into that stockade where you belong. I won't stop until you have nothing left."

"Why?"

"Why?" He pointed towards the bedroom. The very same which had been her bedroom once. "You know precisely why and what you did to me in these very quarters. You poisoned me! You damned near killed me when you pumped that drug into my system. Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to get over that? I'm struggling with the after effects to this day. Hell if not for Doctor Newheiser and his connections I would have ended up as a goddamned junkie on some backwater planet."

"Welcome to my life."

"You had no right!" He yelled at her but stopped trying to chase her.

"I had every right." She matched his intensity. "How deluded are you, Evan? You didn't have to try and blackmail me and you sure as all seven hells didn't have to try and take advantage of me. But I suppose you just couldn't help yourself, could you? You are a sorry excuse for a man and you always will be. You got everything you had coming to you."

He smirked at her. It was a nasty, evil kind of smile. "And you're going to deserve everything you're going to get."

The door chime sounded then, forcing both of them to look towards the doors.

"Who is it?" Mahoney kept his hateful eyes on Star.

The voice coming over the intercom sounded somewhat concerned.

"Commander Leva, sir. Are you alright?"

"Damn it, Commander, I said I didn't wish to be disturbed."

"I understand but there has been an urgent development."

Star took the opportunity to zip up her uniform, wiped a few droplets of blood off her lips and tried to fix up her hair after a number of strands had come loose during their little dance.

Mahoney straighten his as well. "Come in."

The doors parted and the half-Romulan stepped into the quarters. He did so cautiously, taking a moment to look around and then consider the two occupants as well as noticing the bottle lying on the floor, spilling its contents onto the carpet. "Captain." He looked at the Trill second. "Commander."

She responded with a curt nod.

"Is everything alright?"

"Of course, why wouldn't it be? I'm just debriefing Commander Star on *Eagle's* encounter with the pirates." He shot the Trill the briefest of glances before regarding his first officer once more. "You mentioned something urgent, Commander. We're quite busy, please get on with it."

He nodded. "We've received a message from the Thulians. Apparently one of their colonies has been attacked by pirate ships and they are requesting our assistance."

Star spoke up first, recognizing her chance to escape Mahoney and this ship. "I better get back to *Eagle*." She headed towards the doors without delay.

"Commander Star."

She stopped and turned to face Mahoney once more.

"Keep in mind what we've discussed here today." He kept his facial features carefully schooled.

"I don't believe I'm going to forget any time soon." She looked back towards Leva.

"I'll escort you to the transporter room."

The pair left Mahoney's quarters but didn't exchange any words until they had reached their destination. Once there Leva turned to the young woman manning the control console. "Ensign, you're excused."

She nodded sharply and stepped out to give the two senior officers the room.

Leva turned to regard Star as soon as the doors had closed again. "Commander, your lip is bleeding."

She gently touched her mouth and found her fingers coming away with a few drops of dark red blood. "So it is," she said. "Must have bit myself accidentally."

Leva wasn't buying and watched her skeptically. "Sir, what exactly is going on between you and Captain Mahoney?"

She shook her head. "It's not your concern, Commander."

"I respectfully disagree. My new duties on this ship mean that I am now responsible for her safety as well as that of this crew. Not that I needed any more reasons to be suspicious since Mahoney gave me an entire speech about all the reasons why I shouldn't trust you. But after seeing what I saw today, I can't help but be very concerned about what is happening between the two of you."

She sighed heavily. She didn't want to bring Leva into any of this. "I guess you figured that the two of us have some history from the time I was his captain here. Things went ugly between us after and he hasn't quite come to terms with that."

It wasn't very difficult to tell that Leva immediately understood that there was much more to what she had said. "Just tell me one thing, Commander. Is this going to get out of hand?"

Tazla Star wanted to laugh out loud. She had hit Mahoney and he had struck her right back. By any measure of the imagination things were already out of control. Instead she stepped onto the transporter platform, ready to have herself beamed back onto *Eagle* where she could look forward to at least some sense of normalcy again. She turned to face him. "Not if I can help it."

Moments later and after she had returned to *Eagle*, she realized that she may not have the last word in this matter. Mahoney had left no shadow of a doubt that he was going to do whatever he could to make sure that honor went to him instead.

Getting out of the Marines detention complex had turned out to be almost as easy as Sharval had implied. What she had not mentioned however was the fact that they had to make their way through the city's expansive sewer system for a good three miles to complete their escape.

It had been the first time Owens had visited a sewer and he quickly realized that he had not missed out on much. He had read about them in old books and novels but even then he had never felt any desire to see one in person. It was dark, damp and a very cramped space. Worst of all was the stench which had put whatever smell had lingered in their cell to astonishing shame. And yet he couldn't entirely deny that there was something exciting and adventurous about escaping prison through the local sewers and if the stakes hadn't been as high, if they hadn't been doing all this in order to try and stop a war, Michael Owens might have enjoyed himself a little bit, maybe even pretended this was some sort of holodeck fantasy adventure.

He glanced at Deen and it wasn't difficult to tell that the young woman wouldn't have enjoyed this under any kind of circumstances. "Not quite what you're used to, is it, Princess?" he said, using a nickname he had first bestowed upon her when they had met on her home world and which she had immediately come to dislike even if perhaps it wasn't entirely inaccurate, considering she was the daughter of one of the her world's most senior rulers.

Her bright, shining blonde hair caught the little light in the narrow tunnel and reflected it, functioning almost like a torch. Her mood was anything but bright however and she shot him a dark look. "This place is really growing on me. As if the constant rain wasn't enough, we also got thrown into a prison and now are slinking around in one of the most disgusting places I've ever set foot in."

"Speaking about setting your foot into things." Belore pointed at a brown puddle into which the lieutenant had accidentally stepped into. "You really might want to watch your step down here."

Deen uttered a frustrated growl as she lifted her boot out of the puddle and finding something slimy and indefinable sticking to its sole.

Belore seemed quite amused. "Starfleet officers must live a sheltered existence."

Owens shook his head. "No, just her."

"I am a scientist." She explained even as she futilely attempted to rub off the sticky material from underneath her boot by scrapping it against the floor. "I have studied things that would make your skin crawl. I just don't enjoy dirty, smelly, damp places filled with substances even a tricorder wouldn't be able to identify."

The captain smirked at her. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I'll tell you as soon as we get out of this place."

"Then you are in luck, child." Sharval received another disapproving look from the Tenarian who apparently appreciated being called a child even less than a princess. "We have arrived." She paid little attention to the other woman's displeasure and began to climb up a narrow ladder.

The others followed her topside where they were once more greeted by Valeria's never-ending rain and found themselves in a small yard surrounded by low buildings and in a part of the city Owens hadn't seen before. A few uniformed security forces personnel were waiting for them there and for a moment Owens feared their escape had come to an abrupt end.

But as it turned out the Valerians were all on the same side and after Sharval and her people had exchanged a few words, she handed Yoral over to them, explaining that it would be easier to evade those looking for them if they split up. "Besides," she had said, "it's much less of an effort to hide a fellow Valerian than three aliens."

"Sorry to be an imposition." Owens offered a half-smile.

She answered with another one of her easy shrugs. "We'll manage somehow."

"I still do not understand why we had to leave Major Wasco behind though."

"I'm not usually accustomed to helping out people who pull a gun on me," she said. "Besides, he was unconscious and he would have only slowed us down and made it more difficult for us to avoid your Marines."

"I guess I'm new to this whole being a fugitive thing."

"I'm confident you'll learn."

"Let's hope it won't come to that," said Deen. "I'd rather not spend the rest of my life being on the run and hiding away in sewers."

Sharval produced a number of dark blue, hooded cloaks for Owens, Deen and Belore to put on and explained that they would come in useful in hiding their identity and blend in where they were going.

“And where would that be?” Belore asked after they had boarded a ground vessel just large enough to accommodate Sharval and her three companions.

“If I could I would take you towards the eastern continent to a region a few hours from here. It’s one of the few remaining places on this world where neither Cardassians nor Starfleet troops are fighting each other.” She shook her head as she carefully piloted the vehicle down the road. “But there are likely far too many checkpoints we’d have to pass through to get there, especially now that Lam is looking for you. He’d be expecting us to try and head into that direction. I’m taking you to one of my safe houses just outside the city instead. With any luck Lam won’t come looking for you there.”

“What makes you think that?” Owens noticed that they were leaving the scarcely populated capital city behind them and had entered into a dense wooden area. “Why do you think he wouldn’t look for us there?”

“You’ll see.”

After about an hour’s drive on increasingly smaller and narrower roads through the forest, they seemed to approach their destination when trees began to give way to expansive fields and rolling hills. Sharval piloted the vessel towards what looked like a large castle like building surrounded by high walls and sitting on top of one the tallest hills in the region. Small groups of Valerians were working in the surrounding fields or pushing old-fashioned carts along the dirt road.

All of them, Owens noticed, were wearing the same style of robe Sharval had given them to conceal their identities. As they entered the grounds of the compound consisting out of a number of old stone buildings, he could see quite a few of these Valerians sitting in small clusters and praying or meditating.

Deen made the connection first. “This is some sort of monastery.”

Sharval nodded. “Yes. The monks and nuns here are from a peaceful order which shuns modern technology for the most part. They pride themselves in remaining neutral in any conflict but thankfully for us they are also obligated to help those in need and who have nowhere else to go.” She brought the vehicle to a stop in front of the steps leading up to the

main building. "I believe that would be an apt description of our current situation, don't you think?"

But Owens frowned at that. "I'm not sure how comfortable I am with the idea of exploiting these people's religious beliefs for our own gain."

"Relax, Sky Knight, there won't be any need to spoil your immaculate Federation morality you are so proud of. This order's sole reason for existence is to lend a helping hand to those who need one. They won't enter their glorious afterlife if they can't fulfill their sacred mission. So if anything, we're helping them by letting them help us." She shot him a grin before exiting the vehicle.

Owens didn't feel particularly reassured.

"She was right about one thing," said Deen. "We don't really have anywhere else to go."

He nodded and then followed her out of the vehicle with Deen to join Sharval and Belore. The Cardassian, apparently suffering no moral hang-ups, had been one of the first to get out of the car.

Sharval was already speaking to one of the monks. The elderly Valerian had pushed back his hood to reveal long white hair with streaks of blue and much of it finely braided. "Welcome back, Sister Sharval. I see you have brought us a few lost souls."

She nodded and then bowed respectfully. "Yes, Father Broyal, I have. If it is no imposition we would kindly ask for shelter and food for a few days and until we can find another place to stay."

Broyal smiled kindly at her and then at Owens and the others as well. Up close it wasn't difficult for him to spot that neither of them were Valerians but if this in any way concerned him, he hid it well. "What is ours, shall be yours. Please just remember our single condition."

"Of course." Sharval nodded. "None of us are armed and we will bring no weapons into your home."

Broyal bowed. "Then be welcome, all."

Sharval hid the vehicle in a nearby barn and then led the others into one of the smaller buildings making up the large monastery. The way she navigated the many rooms and corridors it seemed clear that she had been here many times before. It became even more obvious when she stepped into a large room with a heavy wooden table at the center on which Owens found a number of padds as well as a few maps of the capital, the surrounding area as well as of all of Valeria.

“Make yourselves at home.” She indicated towards a few makeshift wooden bunks that had been set up along the stonewall at the far side of the room. “If you are hungry you’re in luck, it is just about supper time and the monks should have finished preparing the evening meal. There’s a dining hall at the bottom of the stairs.”

“I wouldn’t mind a bite to eat,” said Deen. “That is if I can wash the smell of those sewers off of me.”

Sharval showed them to a nearby washroom and even found new clothes and shoes for them to wear until their uniforms could be cleaned. All four of them took the opportunity to freshen up. Belore politely declined a new set of clothes, preferring to stay in his armor instead. Afterwards he and Deen headed for the dining hall while Owens stayed with Sharval in the main room.

She aimed a questioning look at Owens once they were alone. “What is it?”

“I beg your pardon?”

She leaned casually against the heavy table as she regarded the Starfleet captain. “You have been giving me this look ever since I came to break you out of that cell.” She crossed her underneath her chest. “Something between suspicion and I don’t know, maybe disappointment. In our culture it is much more common to thank a person who has risked their own life to help another.”

“And I am thankful.”

“Could have fooled me.”

Owens sighed. “I truly am. I may not be happy about these circumstances and of being forced into the role of a fugitive from my own people but we had little choice after Lam decided to arrest us instead of facing reason.”

“There is a but there, isn’t there?”

Owens walked up to one of the windows in the room to take in his new surroundings. The rolling hills with patches of bright sunlight pushing through the irregular cloud cover gave this place a somewhat picturesque quality, even if the rain had shown no sign of letting up. He could spot the dense forest which lay between them and the capital city where General Lam was very likely marshaling his Marines to search for him and the others. He turned to face the woman who had freed him from Lam’s prison, finding her wearing one of her little bemused smiles again. “Where you responsible for the attack on the barracks?”

The smile never wavered as if she had expected this very question. "That's what's been eating you up all this time, hasn't it?"

"Just answer my question."

She took a step closer to him. "Why does it matter? Will you storm out of here with righteous indignation and throw yourself at General Lam's mercy if I were to tell you that I am what your friends in the Marines call a ruthless terrorist?"

"No." He shook his head. "And I suppose you're right. It doesn't make much of a difference at the moment. I am stuck with you for now. For better or worse."

"Mostly better, I hope."

"But I defended you to Lam and the others and knowing that I was wrong about you –"

"If it makes you feel any better we don't have to talk about this. We can just pretend that I'm just a concerned patriot who has only the best interests of my world and my people at heart and who would do almost anything to make sure they are both safe. And you know what?" Her grin widened slightly. "We wouldn't even have to pretend very hard at all."

He nodded. "I suppose I can live with that as long as you agree that you will not use deadly force against Starfleet personnel."

"From what I understand nobody died in that attack on the barracks." Sharval shrugged. "And if they don't try to kill me or the people I care about, I won't try to kill them. I think that's a pretty fair deal."

Owens accepted that. He had little doubt by now that she had been responsible or at least played a large part in the assault on the Marine barracks and probably a number of other actions which Lam would have classed as terrorist attacks. But she was right that there had been no casualties in the latest attack. A great amount of damage and a number of wounded Marines, yes, but nobody had died. He wasn't entirely sure if this had been planned or if it was simply fortuitous happenstance that things had turned out that way. And he also had no way to verify if any previous attacks had similarly resulted in no fatalities. He did know that she could have easily killed Wasco and the other Marines in the detention center but had chosen to stun them instead. For now that was good enough for him. "The questions then is, what do we do next? I am not just going to hide here and do nothing while Lam continues his war. And we're not going to engage in guerrilla warfare with the Marines. It's not effective enough and I am not willing to risk the casualties."

"Always the noble Sky Knight."

"Could we drop the nickname please? How would you like it if I kept referring to you as Land Maiden?"

She smiled in response. "I would encourage you to do so," she said. "Legend has it that the Land Maiden was the most ravishing and perspicacious woman in all the world. So there are obvious parallels right there."

Owens couldn't quite help but return the smile. "Yes, I suppose you are correct."

"Is that a twinkle of amusement in your eyes?" She sounded almost surprised. "I don't believe I have witnessed you smile more than once since our first encounter. Wasn't even sure you were capable of it."

"I'm certain there is much about me you don't know." He stepped up to the table to look over the maps.

She joined him. "I suppose you are correct."

Owens ignored her mimicking his tone and quickly found a map which showed him most of the landmarks he was already familiar with. The Federation embassy at the center of the capital city, the barracks just down the road and the detention complex a few blocks away. He even found the monastery on one of the maps of the surrounding area. Then he spotted something else not too far from their current location. It was a grayed out area taking up quite a bit of space on the map. Somebody had scribbled a few notes in Valerian next to it which he wasn't able to read. He did notice a crude drawing of the Starfleet chevron right at its center. He pointed at the area. "What's this?"

"That's Lam's new fusion plant he's been building for the last few weeks. It's been slow going thanks to Lam being short on resources but I'm fairly certain he's getting help from somebody to make it operational."

"I recall General Lam mentioning this. In fact he wanted us to help him with the construction efforts."

"I guess it's a good thing you are not," she said. "But it won't stop him altogether. We expect that it will go live within the next week or so."

Owens nodded as he tapped the map. "Lam needs this desperately. He doesn't have enough energy to continue this war otherwise, they are already rationing wherever they can. Without this plant his plans for Valeria might just fall apart."

She looked at him. "Too bad you don't believe in guerrilla warfare."

"This is different." He shook his head. "It'd be a tactical strike and one with real consequences for Lam."

"Well, it's a nice idea no matter what you want to call it but the place is practically guarded like a fortress. We'll never get close enough to shut it down."

Owens stood upright again. "There must be a way to either destroy or otherwise render the facility useless before it can go operational. Can you take me to a place where we can have a better look at it?"

She responded with a smirk, clearly enthused by his new attitude. "I like the way you think, Sky Knight. We'll make a guerrilla fighter out of you yet. And I know just the place for a recon mission."

"Let's not waste any time then."

"Before we go there's just one question I've been burning to ask."

He turned to look at her expectantly.

Her smile once again turned into a huge grin. "Do you really believe me as ravishing as the Land Maiden?"

After he had escorted Star to the transporter room, Leva had returned to the bridge to find Captain Mahoney already back in his chair and having ordered a new course for Yarra III, a planet not too far from Ultima Thule and the very same the Thulians had advised had come under attack by pirate forces. *Sacajawea* was heading there at maximum warp with *Eagle* not far behind.

Judging by Mahoney's determined visage, he was hoping he'd be able to catch the pirates in the act.

Leva wasn't entirely sure what had transpired in the captain's quarters between him and Tazla Star. He had heard their loud and clearly agitated voices when he had approached the cabin which had seemed a good indication that they had been in the middle of a heated argument. When he had stepped inside, both their faces had been flushed and their body language tense as if their argument had gone beyond mere words. He had been in security long enough to read the situation. It had come to actual blows between the two officers, Star's bleeding lip giving further credence to his theory.

The fact that neither of them had seemed willing to discuss the incident, formally or even off the record, made it clear to Leva that much more had to be going on than a failed relationship some years ago.

It was highly uncommon in Starfleet for senior officers to engage in violent altercations in this manner. This wasn't the Klingon Defense Force, where he understood such occurrences were commonplace. Even while serving for a few years as a security chief on a busy starbase where he had broken up more than his share of bar fights and disorderly conducts brought on by bad judgment or inebriation, he had never once come across two senior officers, each responsible for the crew of an entire starship, to engage in such a manner.

What made matters even worse had been the conversation he'd had with Mahoney before that episode and so he couldn't help but be concerned that whatever this was could lead to a situation in which his loyalties would have to be tested. And if so, where would they fall if he had to decide between Tazla Star and Evan Mahoney, between *Eagle* and

*Sacajawea*? He wasn't entirely sure and dreaded to have to make such a decision.

"Time to arrival?" Mahoney gave no outward sign that he had been engaged in some sort of physical altercation with a fellow officer just minutes ago.

"At our current speed of warp nine point five we should reach the Yarra system in forty-six minutes but I'm not sure if we can keep it up." Alendra looked at him from operations.

Leva stepped up to the captain. "We've already taxed our engines significantly to make that rendezvous with *Eagle*." Leva did his level best to keep any accusation out of his tone. At the time he had advised Mahoney not to push the engines so hard merely because he wanted to speak to Tazla Star in person as soon as possible. But the captain had been visibly upset at the time and insisted on maximum speed. He had called her actions a blatant disregard for his orders when she had failed to advise him of taking a pirate prisoner. "They may not take much more of this. I know Hendricks is concerned –"

"I've served on this ship longer than your or even Hendricks, Commander, I know what these engines can do." He didn't glance at his first officer as he spoke.

"Yes, sir."

"Marjorie, long range scan of the system, can you detect any pirate vessels?"

The Bolian shook her head. "Sorry, sir, our sensors are not quite powerful enough for a full scan of the system at this range."

Mahoney was not pleased by this response.

"Sir," said Leva. "*Eagle* has a more extensive sensor suite which may be able to give us more data about long-range starship activity."

The captain turned to look at the half Romulan with eyes mirroring accusation, as if questioning Leva's loyalty to his own ship merely by suggesting getting help from *Eagle*.

Leva also thought that Mahoney was likely in no mood to speak to Commander Star again so soon after the episode in his quarters. "I can request an uplink to their sensor equipment to carry out the scan myself."

To that the captain nodded. "Do it."

Leva acknowledged and then headed to his console to put in a request. A small smile came over his lips when he received a response from

Commander Xylion, granting his request immediately and allowing him full access to *Eagle's* sensors via a remote uplink. "We are connected, sir."

"Good." He regarded the Bolian operations officer again. "Lieutenant?"

It took her a moment to work her controls, it wasn't every day she had to scan a system by using somebody else's equipment. Thankfully Starfleet technology was fairly uniform across the board allowing her to get the results she needed without too much delay. "Scans show no starships in that system however I am detecting a number of recent warp trails." She turned to look at the captain. "Consisted with those of Cardassian escorts."

"Damn, we're too late."

Leva swiveled around in his chair. "The colony may still require our assistance."

Mahoney nodded. "Assemble an away team and prepare to beam down once we enter orbit around Yarra III."

The first officer nodded. He also planned to liaise with *Eagle*. As the bigger ship with the larger crew, they had more personnel they could dedicate to rescue operations. He decided not to mention this to Mahoney however. Instead he pointed at the operations officer. "Alendra, you're with me."

The Bolian nodded smartly and handed over her console to a duty officer before following him into the turbolift.

Leva ordered the lift to deck six once she had stepped inside. But only a few moments into their journey deeper into the ship, he asked the computer to stop the car.

Alendra turned to look at the first officer with a questioning look on her cobalt-colored face. "Sir?"

"Marjorie, I have to ask you about the captain."

She sighed and then turned to look away. "To be honest, I'd rather you didn't."

Leva was fully aware that she had been reluctant to discuss Mahoney from the first day he had set foot on *Sacajawea*. Considering his own first impression of the man he wasn't surprised. "I wish I had a choice. Tell me, have you ever witnessed him behaving violently?"

She turned to look at him again. "You mean other than in combat?"

Leva nodded.

"No, not really. What is this about?"

He didn't want to tell her too much. She had been the first officer before him but there was no point in laying all of his suspicions on her. This was not for her to deal with anymore. "I'm just trying to get the measure of the man."

She was too smart to accept that. "This is about him and that Tazla Star woman, isn't it?" She continued when he neither confirmed nor denied this. "I don't trust that woman at all. I know she used to command *Sacajawea* before my time and most others still on board but rumor has it that she nearly got everybody on this ship killed in a bad way."

Leva shook his head. "Don't pay attention to rumors."

"I admit that I've had my concerns about the captain especially since he became more and more reclusive but he was finally getting out of that odd mood when we started chasing down these pirates. And then she shows up, drags up bad memories and the captain is understandably affected by all this."

"Something bad happened between Mahoney and Star but I'm not entirely confident that the captain is completely blameless in the matter."

She regarded him carefully. "What are you saying, Commander?"

He sighed. "I am concerned that whatever their history, it may start to affect our ability to function as a cohesive unit."

At that her eyes widened noticeably.

"I just need to know that I can rely on you if some sort of crisis would arise because of all this."

Alendra took a moment to allow this to sink in. "My loyalties are to this ship and her captain, Commander." She turned to face the turbolift doors again, signifying that she was done discussing this.

"Of course they are." He suppressed another sigh. "Computer, resume lift."

By the time Leva reached the transporter room via a detour to his office which on this ship really just meant the antechamber of his quarters, he had already spoken to Commander Star on *Eagle* to coordinate their efforts and then found Alendra and Doctor Newheiser waiting for him, along with a couple of armed security guards and two medics carrying equipment. Leva didn't miss that the security guards and medics were terribly young men and women, probably mere weeks out of basic training.

The Bolian woman avoided eye contact when he first stepped into the room. Newheiser was not so shy. "Commander, the bridge just called to let

us know that they have not been able to make contact with the surface. The colony consists out of six thousand people according to the Thulians. We may need additional medical personnel.”

“I have liaised with *Eagle* and they will beam down more teams but only after we’ve completed an initial sweep of the area and we know what we’re dealing with. The pirates may have left behind some surprises.” He strapped on a phaser to emphasize the point.

Newheiser nodded. “Of course, we have to be careful. But I’m quite looking forward to meet my old friend Elijah Katanga.”

*“Mahoney to transporter room, we’ve just entered standard orbit. You may proceed. Bridge out.”*

Leva indicated to his team. “You heard the man.”

The three officers and four crewmen placed themselves on the platform and moments later the transporter disintegrated their bodies down to their molecules only to reassemble them a few seconds later and thousands of miles below.

So’Dan Leva found it to be a hot planet, or at least that particular part of Yarra III. The single sun, shining brightly and intensely down on the mostly flat and barren surface. It was not a place he would have chosen as a colony. But of course he didn’t know much about the Thulians. Nobody really did and this environment may have been ideal for their requirements.

Not twenty paces away Leva spotted another team materializing out of blue columns of light. The *Eagle* away team was led by Lieutenant Commander Xylion and consisted out of Nora Laas, Doctor Katanga and a pair of security officers and medical personnel.

*Eagle’s* science officer and temporary XO approached the group from the *Sacajawea*. “The Thulian colony lies immediately beyond this ridge.” He pointed at a slight rise about four to five hundred meters in front of them. They had chosen this beam in location on purpose in case the pirates had laid a trap within the colony. “I suggest we approach with care.”

“Agreed, Commander.” Leva wore a little smile, feeling an immediate sense of familiarity settling in from working once again with the crew of the ship he had served on for so long. “Laas and I will take point.”

“Very well.”

Leva glanced at Nora and the Bajoran security chief stepped up next to him and then walked at his side as they headed out towards the colony.

“What’s the word from the ship of the damned?” she whispered after they had set out.

He skewered her with disapproving sidelong look. “Becoming more damned by the minute.”

“I know Star came over to see you. I don’t think I ever seen in her in such a foul mood before.”

“Same can be said about Mahoney.”

“I don’t like this, So’.”

He uttered a little sigh but didn’t respond, forcing himself to focus on their more immediate mission instead.

He debated for a moment if he should have made some introductions but dismissed the idea, they had more important things to attend to. Besides, he could hear Newheiser already seeing to it.

“Doctor Katanga, such a pleasure to meet you again.”

“Uh, yes, nice seeing you too, Doctor ... ?”

“Newheiser. Alan Newheiser. We’ve met at a medical conference on Casperia Prime a few years ago.”

“I’m sure we did. I apologize, Doctor, as you can imagine at my age I have attended so many conferences over the years, to be brutally honest after a while it all just becomes a bit of a blur. Please don’t feel offended I didn’t recognize you.”

Leva couldn’t help but smirk. Clearly Newheiser, who didn’t seem to have anything further to say on the subject, wasn’t nearly as close to Katanga as he would have liked.

They had nearly reached the top of the rise when Alendra consulted her tricorder. “Readings appear to be inconclusive.”

“I’ll show you what’s not inconclusive.” Nora pointed at the dark smoke rising from just beyond the rise.

Xylion had his tricorder out as well. “Agreed. We should proceed with extreme caution.”

Leva nodded and looked over the combined team. “Spread out and confirm phasers are on stun.”

Alendra and Xylion put away their tricorders and reached for their weapons and then stepped up along with the four security guards while the doctors and the medical team made up the rear.

They slowly made their way to the very top of the ridge and were rewarded with a good view of the colony just below. Or rather, what little remained of it.

“God have mercy,” said Katanga as he reached their position.

And yet it was clear as day that no deity had shown any in this place. The colony had been wiped off the face of this world. The only things that remained were deep craters in the soil as evidence of heavy orbital bombardment and dark scorch marks where once buildings had stood. None were left. Any medical help for those who had once inhabited this colony would have come far too late as it was obvious even to the most optimistic observer that nobody could have survived an assault of such devastating scale. The attackers had made absolutely certain of this.

Leva immediately understood that this was no rescue mission. This was purely recovery.

It hadn't taken them long to get to a spot from which they could get a better look at the fusion plant. Sharval had taken Owens, Deen and Belore on a short twenty-minute trip in her ground vehicle until they had reached another forest. From there they had walked perhaps two miles or so through mostly dense vegetation which had offered some protection from the rain, until they found themselves at the edge of a valley. Sharval had handed them all binoculars before they had set out and just to be safe they had approached the last few meters crouching on their bellies and until they were positioned close to a precipice.

In the valley below and between them and an expansive shoreline further to the North, Owens spotted the power plant, a collection of four large, square buildings as well as a wide empty space which looked very much like a landing port. All of this within a walled compound perhaps the size of *Eagle's* saucer section. It looked fairly close to completion, in fact he could hardly spot any external works remaining, leaving him to speculate that they were most likely finishing off construction to the fusion generators inside those buildings before the plant could go live and provide the energy which Lam needed to run his army.

He took a look through the binoculars which allowed him to zoom in closer. The most discouraging discovery were the large number of Marines protecting the facility, stationed in a number of sentry towers spread along the thick walls as well as patrolling the outside of the compound. Owens guessed there to be at least a hundred Marines in total but probably more. Considering that Lam had been concerned about a shortage of troops, the numbers he had deployed to protect this facility gave further proof of how significant he considered it to his plans. It also made Owens' much more difficult.

"As you can see, Lam takes protecting this place seriously." Sharval was lying directly next to Owens. "A ground assault is pretty much out of the question."

"What about from the air?" Deen had placed herself on Owens' other side and was equally spying through her binoculars.

"Perhaps if you still had a starship in orbit," she said. "But even then you'd be lucky to get a target lock with all those scramblers throwing off

sensors. See those little rotating spheres on top of the walls?"

Owens zoomed in closer to focus in on one of them. They weren't very large, perhaps the size of human head. He had never seen anything quite like it before but he couldn't admit to be an expert on ground warfare either. "What are they?"

"Smart launchers," said Sharval. "One or two of them can be devastating enough but there are at least two dozen down there. More than enough to blow anything that comes too close out of the skies. Even hives are likely not going to make much of a dent. That's if they can get through the shields."

"What are hives?" Deen glanced at the other woman.

"I've heard of those." Belore nodded slowly but didn't take his eyes off the compound. "Miniature drones which act almost like insect swarms. They were developed by the Dominion for ground bombardments."

"Sounds lovely." The Tenarian returned her attention to her binoculars.

Belore shook his head. "I admittedly do not have a significant military background but I would estimate we'd need close to a thousand men to get past those walls and the guards to take control of this power plant."

Sharval shook her head. "There aren't a thousand men in all the Valerian security forces in this region."

"What about a military unit?" said Owens.

"We don't have one."

He gave her an astonished look.

"What? We are a peaceful people. We used to have a small defensive fleet before Lam pretty much disbanded it. But other than that we never had a need for a standing military."

Deen slowly nodded her head in agreement and Owens could understand why. After all she herself hailed from a race of people who shunned all military conflict, had pretty much overcome the need for violence centuries ago. But while the Tenarians had been lucky enough to find themselves in a remote pocket of space, the Valerian sector was anything but. Not with the Cardassians and the Breen as neighbors. No wonder General Lam considered them vulnerable enough to require protection from an opportunistic would-be Cardassian occupational force. No matter how misguided his intentions.

Belore glanced at the others. "What if we secured additional reinforcements from other regions?"

The Valerian was still not convinced. "It still wouldn't be enough. Certainly not to take control of the plant. It would be a suicide mission."

"I don't want to take control of the plant, I want to destroy it."

"And prey how, great Sky Knight, do you plan on accomplishing such a magnificent feat?"

He ignored her and instead looked towards Deen and Belore. "I want you two to walk around the edge of the valley and get a look at that facility from every angle. See if you can identify any kind of weak points, blind spots or other vulnerabilities that would allow us to possibly sneak into the plant undetected. But stay hidden and don't get any closer. Let's not give them an opportunity to take prisoners again."

Deen nodded. "Don't worry, after last time, I have no desire to get another taste of General Lam's hospitality." She crawled back and away from the ledge again and Belore followed her moments later.

Sharval looked after her for a moment. "She likes you, doesn't she?"

"Who Dee?" But his focus remained on studying the compound through his binoculars. "I told you, we're close friends. I've known her since she was a child, ever since my ship came across her home world on my very first assignment out of the Academy."

The Valerian scooted a little closer to Owens until her body was practically touching his. "Come now, I've seen the looks the two of you exchange. There is more there than just friendship."

He put down the binoculars to regard the woman at his side, suddenly so close he could easily smell her fragrance. It wasn't at all unpleasant. But she had one of those wide grins plastered to her face again, making it difficult to know if she was being serious or just trying to get a reaction out of him. "Trust me when I say we're just very good friends. Besides, as you have noticed, she's still very young."

"Sure." She shrugged. "But what does age have to do with it?"

Owens uttered a sigh. "She's like a daughter to me, alright?"

"You're not that old. Are you? Truth be told I can't tell with humans."

"I suppose not quite old enough to be her biological father, no."

"Well, then maybe the attraction is one sided."

"Do you mind if we spoke of something else? Such as finding a way to destroy that power plant." He was doing his level best not to let his

exasperation at her chosen conversation topic show in his tone. "I really rather think that should be our priority right about now."

"You've been here a couple of days. I've spent months thinking of ways to do this and haven't come up with anything."

He looked right into her eyes. "Maybe you haven't thought of everything. Ever consider that you might not have all the answers?"

She bit her bottom lip. "I like you when you show some attitude."

"Sharval, please –"

"Hey, you notice something?" She looked up and towards the sky.

It took him a moment to realize what she was talking about. Then he understood. "It has stopped raining."

She nodded and then looked past the plant below and towards the shoreline a few miles to the North and the ocean at the horizon. It had gotten late and Valeria's large sun had begun to set, giving the impression of the massive star slowly descending into the sea in an array of colors ranging from bright orange to dark crimson spreading across the watery surface, giving the appearance as if the sun was slowly melting into the ocean itself.

It was one of the more stunning sunsets Owens had witnessed.

"You know, the story of the mighty Sky Knight coming to save the precious Land Maiden and her people from the Ancient Enemy is one of my favorite legends of my childhood. In it there is this moment when the rain stops during the sunset and the Maiden gazes longingly into the sky. It is told that in that brief moment, as the gods take a short respite from their arduous tasks of keeping the stars in the sky, they are predisposed to listen to the wishes and desires of mere mortals."

He looked at her. "Who is this ancient enemy?"

She shrugged. "Just stories parents tell misbehaving children. Personally I think the legends of the mysterious and dangerous Ancient Enemy are based on historical facts. But nobody knows who they are. My guess has always been the Breen. Mysterious and dangerous seems to be an apt description for them."

Owens offered a nod, fully aware that it wasn't unusual for ancient myths to be based on at least a kernel of truth.

"In the legends it was at a moment just like this that the Land Maiden asked the gods for a miracle and they delivered her the Sky Knight."

Michael Owens watched the Valerian woman as she looked towards the sunset again and brushed a few strands of long purple hair away from

her face. He had never quite expected Sharval, a commander of her world's security forces, a secret rebel, a jokester and quite clearly a free spirit, to have such a sentimental side to her as well. And yet as he regarded her sharp profile so close to him, he also had to admit something that he had, in fact, noticed from the very first time he had met her, being shoved to the ground by overeager Marines who in hindsight may not have been all that wrong about her after all. She was beautiful. Not like DeMara Deen, she didn't possess any of that youthful and ethereal quality or innocence the Tenarian was naturally blessed with. On the contrary, her beauty was much more earthly and accessible. And even her often brutal honesty had a certain charm.

She turned to look him right in the eye, perhaps thinking of him and his qualities as much as he was about her. Then she leaned in, she didn't have to very much, they were already close enough to touch, and she pressed her lips against his.

Against his better judgment he opened his lips and their tongues met as their eyes closed. After a moment they slowly parted again and she uttered a little sigh as she looked back into his eyes almost as if she had expected there to be more. "I've never kissed an alien before. It's interesting."

He wasn't sure what came over him in that moment but he wasn't ready to just leave it at that. "I can do much better." He reached out for her face and gently guided her lips back onto his, this time taking the initiative, he kissed her with a passion that even surprised him.

Her eyes were sparkling at him when it was over. "Oh, Sky Knight. That was good."

"Michael," he said softly.

"Right. Can we do it again?"

It was only then that it started to dawn on him what a very bad idea this had been. When he had been much younger he had frequented a number of areas not too different to this one where he and his girlfriend would spend hours doing little else than what he had just done with Sharval. But none of those places had been on an alien planet, engaged in a violent war and while he was scoping out power plants which he was determined to blow to high heavens.

Before he could consider the inappropriate nature of what they were doing any further he could hear footsteps. He turned and was relieved to find that they belonged to Deen as she stepped out of the forest behind

them. That relief quickly vanished when he spotted her face. Her eyes filled with concern.

He quickly crawled away from the edge of the cliff and a moment later Sharval followed.

Owens couldn't immediately tell the nature of Deen's perturbations and if they were related to her task of finding a weak spot in the power plant's defenses or if they were about something else. Inexplicably he found himself hoping that it wasn't the latter. "Are you alright? Where's Belore?"

She nodded slowly. "I'm fine. We split up to cover more ground."

Owens nodded.

A subdued beeping sound from a small device on Sharval's wrist caught his attention. She inspected it and frowned.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure. I think it may be a message but the comm scramblers in this area are too strong to get a clear signal. I need to get back to my vehicle, it carries more powerful equipment."

He nodded. "Go ahead, we'll wait for Belore and then follow you."

Sharval took off and Owens painfully realized that he was left alone with Deen. Something that shouldn't have been an issue at all except for the fact that he felt a certain awkwardness between them all of a sudden. Maybe even an irrational tinge of guilt. "Did you find anything?"

She shook her head. "I've looked closely at the eastern and southern sides of the facility and I couldn't find anything that looked even remotely like a weak spot."

"Perhaps Belore had more luck."

Her purple eyes practically skewered him. "Did you get a chance to spot anything else?" Her voice was cooler than usual. "You seemed a little distracted just now."

He considered her carefully. "We were discussing options." He sounded lame even to his own ears.

"Didn't look like that's what you were doing."

"Where you spying on us?" He tried to sound outraged by the idea.

"I wouldn't call it that." She shook her head. "Why? Were you doing something you'd rather keep a secret?"

Owens frowned at the young woman he had known for the majority of his Starfleet career. He couldn't remember her ever sounding quite so malicious before. "If there is something you want to say, just say it."

"It's just that I don't think that this is the time or place to get involved with that woman. We came here to complete a mission. A very important mission. To end a war."

"You don't think I know that?"

"Oh I see." She took a few steps away before turning back to face her captain again. "So you are just doing your part to foster a working relationship with the local population. Is that it?"

"You are out of line, *Lieutenant*."

"I'm out of line?" She sounded genuinely astonished now. "And what would you call what you've been doing with Sharval?"

Owens took a few steps towards the Tenarian to make sure he could keep his voice low. Then he looked right into her sparkling eyes, brimming with more than their usual intensity. "You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you're jealous."

She laughed at that. But it wasn't the same sound he was accustomed to. It didn't contain half the warmth and honesty it usually did. "Jealous? Don't be ridiculous. If anything I'm worried about you."

"How's that?"

"Well for one there's your relationship with Donners. Or at least I think there's a relationship. I knew how terrible you felt about that whole cheating affair and the time travel episode. And now here you are with that woman. I thought you had learned from your mistakes."

Michael uttered a heavy sigh and this time it was he who turned away to spare himself her accusatory glances. She was right of course. He had strong feelings for his fellow starship captain and Academy friend Amaya Donners. Always had, even back when they had been in San Francisco together. Back then there had been another woman however and he had made the fateful mistake of trying to carry on with both of them. It had naturally ended badly and ruined a valuable friendship. Much later he had been given the unexpected chance of a lifetime to fix his past mistakes. And it had only been a few months since his relationship with Donners had promised to finally go to places he had always secretly hoped for it go. Was he really willing to endanger all of that for Sharval? Had he truly not learned from the mistakes of his youth as Deen had pointed out?

Belore returned then stepping into the clearing, shaking his head as soon as he spotted the two Starfleet officers. "This place puts a Cardassian citadel to shame. I really cannot see a way to even get near it." But neither

Owens nor Deen were paying him much attention. "Did you have any luck?"

The Tenarian shook her head but keeping her eyes on her captain. "No, no luck at all."

"We may need to consider a new plan then."

Owens turned away from Deen only very slowly but then quickly realized that they didn't have the time to consider his personal life any further. Deen had been right about another point. They had a mission to accomplish. "You might be right. Let's go find Sharval." He headed back out into the forest beyond which Sharval had left her vehicle.

They spotted her after just a few minutes, practically running towards them.

Owens could see the anxiety on her face as she came closer. "What is it?"

"The Marines." She was slightly out of breath after running back to find them, needing a moment to catch it again. "They are moving against the monastery."

Following their discovery of the eradicated colony, Mahoney had taken *Sacajawea* to attempt and chase down the pirates responsible by following the warp trails they had discovered while *Eagle* remained in orbit around Yarra III to fully investigate the scene.

Star was naturally relieved that Mahoney had decided to split up again, clearly his desire to eliminate these pirates which now appeared more ruthless than ever trumped his wish to see her destroyed, as he had put it. At least for now. Of course it wouldn't be too difficult for him to accomplish both his goals. Once she had returned from her painful encounter with him she had found out that he hadn't bluffed about Atticus West. The FNS reporter had in fact left *Eagle* during their previous encounter with the *Sacajawea* and had remained on that ship, no doubt on Mahoney's suggestion. She had thought it unlikely at first that he would go as far as reveal classified information to the reporter and thereby endanger his own career, but she knew better now. The man had become obsessed with trying to tear her down even if it came at the cost of his own commission. There wasn't anything more dangerous in Star's book than a man with nothing to lose.

She forced herself to stop obsessing about the threat to her own career. There was little she could do at present to foil Mahoney's plans unless she was willing to chase down *Sacajawea*, bring *Eagle's* more formidable weapons to bear and blow her out of the stars. Had it not been for the two hundred or so innocent crewmembers on board, she was actually quite fond of that idea. Her many critics within Starfleet would have been hardily surprised if she had done just that. Instead they would've basked in the knowledge that they had been proven right all along in insisting that Star was dangerous and unfit to ever wear the uniform.

She was fairly determined not to give them that kind of satisfaction. Plus, mass murder really wouldn't look too good on her already tainted résumé, she decided with a little smirk, trying to find the humor in her quickly disintegrating life.

With those dark thoughts banned to a far corner of her mind for now, she stepped into main engineering where she found Xylion, chief engineer

Louise Hopkins and Nora Laas standing around the table-shaped master control station. "What did you find?"

"Not a lot." The Bajoran shook her head. "They didn't leave us with much."

"What we have been able to establish with certainty," said the Vulcan science officer, "is that the attacker used photon torpedoes against their target. The latent energy signatures are consistent with matter/antimatter projectiles and we were able to detect trace elements of torpedo casings."

"Could you tell the origin of the torpedoes?"

Hopkins took that one. "These were just trace elements but we are fairly certain they were Cardassian made."

Star nodded. "Which would be consistent with the warp trails we found in orbit."

"And we know that the pirates like to use outdated Cardassian ships." Nora crossed her arms in front of her chest as if she had spoken the last word on the issue, as if the mystery had been solved.

But Star wasn't entirely convinced yet and considered for a moment what she had learned. Then she glanced back at Xylion. "You said attacker. Singular. Do you believe only one ship was responsible for this?"

The Vulcan offered a minuscule nod. "We have been able to trace the torpedo paths by analyzing the ion trail disturbances left in the atmosphere when they were deployed. We were able to determine that a total of twelve projectiles were fired from a single vessel in low orbit."

Nora noticed Star's thoughtful expression. "What are you thinking?"

She looked up at the Bajoran. Even though Star had been a starship captain once, she had never been very good at sharing her thoughts with others. Even back then she had preferred to take in the information her crew provided her but rarely had that been a two-way street. Since coming on *Eagle* she had started to learn that people tended to work a lot better when they shared their thoughts openly. She couldn't help but wish she had realized that three years earlier. Perhaps her life wouldn't have taken such a drastic turn into the wrong direction. "We've detected multiple warp trails, implying more than one ship arrived here. But only one fired on the planet, why?"

"It may be possible that they decided they required only one vessel to destroy the colony. Turned out they were right." The young chief engineer looked over the computer readouts again.

"Then why bring more?"

Nora looked at the first officer. "An escort perhaps?"

Star nodded slowly but obviously not yet won over by that theory. "Commander, how long do you think it took that ship to fire twelve torpedoes and destroy the colony?"

The Vulcan worked a computer station to gain access to the requested data. "Judging by the decay rates of the ion trails, I would estimate that the attack lasted a total of at least eight minutes and twenty-six seconds."

"If they had used two or three ships they could have easily halved that time, reducing the chance of being intercepted or take damage from ground defenses."

Hopkins shook her head. "From what we can tell the colony never returned fire."

The first officer regarded her with a surprised look. "Over eight minutes and they just sat there and took it without once returning fire?"

The security chief shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe they didn't have defenses."

"Would you set up a colony this far from your home world in a less than stable sector without means to defend itself?"

She shook her head. "I wouldn't, no."

Granted, Star didn't know much about the Thulians, even with her extensive intelligence background, but she was fairly certain they were not pacifists like some races she had come across who stubbornly insisted on refusing to use weapons of any kind, even in self-defense. "Something just doesn't feel right about this." She didn't miss the empty looks she received from her officers in response. "I think we need to have another chat with our guest."

\* \* \*

Only a few minutes after their meeting in engineering, Star and Nora Laas entered the brig. John Doe had since been returned to his detention cell after his stay in sickbay and over Elijah Katanga's objections. But this time Star had stood firm. After all the pirate had quickly recovered under the veteran doctor's care and she saw no reason why he shouldn't be kept locked up as long as he was unwilling to cooperate with them.

She found the Valerian man lying on his back on top of the retractable cot of his cell which had to be a lot less pleasant than the biobed in sickbay. The two women stepped up to the force field but the prisoner took no notice of their presence. Instead he kept staring at the ceiling.

Star grinned. "Comfortable, Mister Doe?"

"That's not my name." He made no eye contact.

"Seeing that you have not provided us with one, what would you prefer us to call you instead?"

"I would prefer you did not speak to me at all."

"Tell you what. You start sharing with me everything I want to know and I promise I will never come to see you again."

"And rot in some sort of Federation penal colony for the rest of my life? I don't think so."

Nora Laas offered a cold stare. "What makes you think that you're not going there anyway?"

But Star was still willing to make a deal. "My offer from before stands. I just want the ring leaders. The rest can go free. So the choice of heading to prison is really your own."

"Have you ever considered that perhaps I'm a ring leader?"

To that Nora uttered a little laugh. "You just don't seem smart enough."

It got a reaction out of him and he sat up on the cot to glare at the Bajoran through the force field. "Why don't you come in here and say that to my face?"

She regarded him with a puzzled look. "Really? You want that? After what happened last time? Tell me, are you a glutton for punishment by any chance?"

He crossed his arms defiantly. "I have nothing further to say to you."

"Fine, then just listen," said Star. "After your friends' unprovoked attack on what appears to have been an unarmed Thulian colony, this little piracy game your playing here just got a whole lot more serious. You're associated with a group of mass murderers now, which means whatever restraint we have shown up until now is going out of the airlock. We will hunt them down and bring them to justice no matter what. And if they continue to resist, we will not shy away from using deadly force." Her voice carried a razor-sharp and threatening edge now, one she had perfected when working deep cover in the Orion Syndicate and it left very little doubt that she meant business. "You'll find we're not your

grandfather's Starfleet anymore. Not after fighting the Dominion for two years. If nothing else, they've taught us a very important lesson. When we see a threat, we will take action. And we'll do so quickly and without compromise and before it has a chance to truly hurt us."

She could feel Nora's eyes on her, probably not quite having expected such a tone and she most likely wondered how much of what she had said she truly meant and how much had been merely an act to force their prisoner to talk. Truth be told, she wasn't entirely sure herself.

The Valerian pirate's eyes had widened slightly however, showing at least some evidence that he hadn't entirely dismissed her words as he stared back at the Trill commander. But he still refused to speak. Silence settled over the brig for a moment.

"Have it your way. But know that whatever happens next will be solely on you. Know that you could have stopped it all." Star turned on her heels to head back for the doors. Nora remained only a heartbeat longer, shooting the man in the cell a poisonous glare, before following the commander.

"It wasn't us."

Star stopped just before she had reached the doors and turned back to find John Doe now standing near the force field of his cell. "Say again?"

He shook his head. "We didn't do this," he said. "The attack on that colony you mentioned. It wasn't us."

"And how can you be so sure?" Nora had also turned to face him once more. "You were our guest while this attack took place. Perhaps your friends decided to escalate matters in your absence. Perhaps even as retribution for us taking you prisoner."

"I don't believe that."

Star took a step closer to the man. "You have to give us more than that."

But he was obviously reluctant to do so. "I suggest you have a closer look at those Thulian freighters."

"Why?"

He shrugged and stepped back to his cot, lying down again and returning to stare at the ceiling. "I've given you enough."

Star and Nora exchange brief glances before they left the brig and stepped into the corridor outside.

Nora faced her the moment the doors had closed behind them. "Don't tell me you believe any of this? He's bound to say whatever it takes to try and disassociate himself with his mass murdering friends."

Star considered her words for a moment. "It wouldn't hurt to look."

"Commander, may I remind you that we need to go back to Valeria. It's been two days already and the captain may require our help. Instead we're out here on a wild goose chase. As chief of security you have my support but even that will only go so far. My main concern is with the captain."

Tazla Star nodded. Some months earlier Nora would have been a lot more blunt about her disagreements so she couldn't help but at least appreciate the restraint on her part. Of course it didn't change anything. She was in charge of *Eagle* at present and she was going to give the orders even if they were an extension of Mahoney's. And she couldn't abandon them just yet. Not until she could figure out a way to stop him from getting her thrown out of Starfleet. Was that selfish of her, she wondered? Perhaps, but she also couldn't help but feel that there was more to this pirate hunt he had committed them on than met the eye.

"I'll note your objections in my log, Lieutenant."

She shook her head. "I don't want you to log my objections. I want you to resolve whatever this is and get us back on mission." Without another words she turned to walk down the corridor.

The Trill sighed. "Commander Star to bridge."

"*This is Culsten, sir.*"

"Lieutenant, are there any Thulian freighters currently in range?"

The helmsman only needed a few seconds to find out. "*Yes, sir. There is one about four hours from our present position at warp eight. It's heading towards Federation space on a routine shipping route.*"

"Set a course to intercept and engage. Star out." She watched Nora Laas disappear into a turbolift further down the corridor. If only things were as easy as she had implied, Star thought to herself. When it came to the mess that was her life, it seemed as if they never were.

Owens had insisted they headed back towards the monastery even if both Sharval and Belore had strongly suggested to avoid it at all cost and attempt to locate a new safe house now that the Marines had seemingly successfully picked up their trail. But as far as Michael was concerned, he couldn't live with the idea that the monks who had taken them in would come to harm just because they had given him and his fugitive allies refuge. He still hoped Lam's men wouldn't go that far, after all they were part of Starfleet, trained to protect the innocent, but Deen had been right when she had pointed out earlier that Marines were a different kind of breed. Their allegiance was unquestionably to General Lam and he was certain that it overrode whatever Federation ideology they should have followed.

He wasn't sure what he and the others could do to stop them from possibly ransacking or even injuring the peaceful monks and nuns that had been so willing to help them but he was determined to at least try.

Sharval approached carefully and didn't steer her vehicle directly towards the monastery. Instead she headed for a small hill a few hundred meters away and stopped at a spot that was partially concealed by a number of large trees.

All four occupants disembarked and made use of their binoculars to get a picture of what to expect. Owens immediately spotted the small shuttle in the courtyard. It was fairly similar in design to the ones they carried on *Eagle*, but instead of the white livery with red stripes, this one had an olive tint and judging by its smaller nacelles, he suspected it wasn't warp capable, perhaps not even designed for orbital or outer space operations.

"I am counting five Marines," said Deen. "And wait—is one of them Major Wasco?"

Indeed it was. He was standing next to an Andorian Marine Owens also recognized and the two of them seemed to be questioning Father Broyal. Three more heavily armed Marines were standing nearby, holding their assault rifles at the ready as they carefully studied the buildings from the outside

Owens nodded. "Yes. But thankfully they only sent a small scouting team."

"Reinforcements won't be far behind." Sharval kept her eyes on the Marines as well.

Belore had joined also. "If we are lucky, these monks will not tell them anything and all we have to do is wait for them to move on."

And so they waited and hoped. But those hopes were soon dashed when two Marines entered the building and a short time later reemerged holding what Owens quickly recognized as a couple of Starfleet uniform jackets. It was his own and Deen's which they had left behind after they had changed into clean civilian attire.

Wasco considered the pieces of clothing and then turned away from the monastery to carefully take in the surrounding landscape as if looking for somebody.

"Get down." Sharval flattened herself to the ground and the others followed instinctively.

When Owens spied through the binoculars again he could see the major's face as he looked into the distance. Wasco knew they weren't in the monastery anymore but he rightly suspected that the people he was looking for hadn't gone far.

Sharval could see it too. "We need to get out of here."

The Cardassian nodded. "I agree."

But there was something on Wasco's face which made Owens hesitate. He couldn't quite place it but it gave him pause "And go where? It doesn't appear there is any place on this planet they won't find us."

Deen glanced at Owens. "Getting off it is not currently an option."

Sharval carefully got back on her feet and headed towards her vehicle.

"Where are you going?" Owens turned to follow her.

"I don't know if you had noticed but if you want to stay and confront them, we are at a serious disadvantage." She got back behind the controls.

"Get in."

Owens and the others boarded the ground vessel again and Sharval quickly had them on the move once more. Thankfully the whisper quiet electrical engine would not draw much attention.

Owens shot her a quizzical glance. "What are you thinking?"

"You'll see."

She didn't head directly back to the monastery. Instead, after a very short drive, they approached what Michael thought to be a barn like building, most likely housing livestock or supplies. Sharval parked the vehicle behind it and they disembarked.

Inside the barn they found a number of four-legged animals, most of which had thick gray fur with dark spots, a little smaller than cows but larger than sheep, many with single horns growing out of their foreheads. Owens suspected that they fulfilled similar roles as the two Earth species. They seemed pretty docile and didn't pay their humanoid guests any mind, much more interested in munching on their food instead.

Sharval led them to the far corner of the building and indicated towards an area with a number of wooden barrels. "Help me with these."

On her instructions, Owens, Deen and Belore assisted Sharval with moving four heavy barrels filled with foodstuffs to one side to then allow her to remove a tarp on which the barrels had rested and locate a hidden trap door underneath. With Owens' help she lifted a wide chest out of the hiding place.

She opened it to reveal an assortment of weapons. Owens recognized two Cardassian rifles, a compact Bajoran carbine and a few disruptor pistols, also of Cardassian design.

Deen looked over Sharval's shoulder to take note of the small arsenal. "I thought you were not supposed to have weapons here."

She glanced up at the Tenarian. "Really? You're going to give me a hard time over that now? Besides, Broyal didn't want me to bring weapons into the monastery. Technically we're outside of it."

"Good enough for me." Owens took one of the rifles and passed it on to Belore. Sharval kept the carbine and he handed Deen one of the pistols while he kept the second rifle. It wasn't a weapon he was used to but after quickly looking it over he found all the usual functions even if much fewer than on a comparable Starfleet weapon. He was relieved to note that it did have a stun setting. Michael had no intention of trying to kill a fellow Starfleet officer. "I am still not comfortable with firing on my own people."

Sharval stood and activated her weapon. "Well, you better get comfortable. And quick. Because you're the one who wanted to stay. And if we do, I don't see a way around a fire fight."

"I want to try and appeal to Wasco again."

Sharval smirked. "He might not be in such a good mood after last time."

Deen shot her a dark look. "That would be thanks to you."

She just shrugged at that.

The Tenarian considered Owens next. "So, what's the plan?"

"We need to find a way to get Wasco alone."

Belore had moved back towards the main doors which had remained partially open. He turned back towards the others. "It appears as if they are coming to us."

That caused Owens and the others to join him. They spotted one of the Marines slowly making his way towards the barn, carefully sweeping the area with his weapon.

Belore took aim with his disruptor. "I think I can take him out."

Owens shook his head. "Hold your fire."

But the Cardassian pulled the trigger anyway. Owens watched as the amber-colored beam went wide, missing the solitary Marine by a couple of feet. In response the man threw himself to the ground and pretty much out of sight.

Sharval skewered Belore with piercing scowl. "What kind of Cardassian soldier are you?"

He shrugged. "Really more of a diplomat than a soldier."

While they couldn't see the Marine anymore, he apparently seemed to have a good idea where they were and promptly returned fire. The entire barn trembled slightly when he hit the outside wall. The animals too took notice.

Owens and the others quickly slipped into cover as the Marine fired again. This time he managed to find the opening between the doors and the phaser beam struck a support strut within the building, causing the entire barn to rattle even more.

The livestock quickly became agitated, bellowing loudly they apparently correctly gathered that their home had become a very unsafe place to be. It took another phaser strike to convince them to make for a swift escape.

Owens turned towards their berths to see about a dozen angry and scared animals freeing themselves and heading towards the only exit. The very same he and his team were currently taking cover behind. The options it seemed were either to be trampled to death by a stampede of infuriated beasts, be impaled by their sharp-looking horns or otherwise attempt to stay ahead of the animals and flee out of the doors only to become an easy target for the Marine outside.

It was then that he spotted the two ladders attached to the wall and flanking the gate, leading to the barn's upper level and he quickly gestured towards them. "Go up!" He reached out for Deen who stood closest to him and pushed her towards the nearest ladder.

He made sure she was on her way to climb upwards before he glanced towards the opposite side of the barn to find that Sharval and Belore had found the ladder there as well. Then he reached out for the rungs and followed Deen.

Not a moment too soon it turned out as the first animal came racing passed him, taking out the lower rungs of the ladder while doing so and then with the combined bulk of its friends, they tore the main gate wide open to rush out of the building.

Once Michael had made it to the safety of the upper level he glanced across again to see Sharval give him a nod to indicate that she was alright. Belore had taken a knee beside her.

The second floor of the barn was really just a couple of ledges attached to the outside walls and overlooking the gate and the main floor below. Owens indicated towards what had once been the doors and the others nodded and trained their weapons in anticipation of the Marines making a move through the only entrance.

Now that Belore had already opened fire, he didn't hold much hope that they would be able to talk to Wasco. The Marines would come after them and they would come in shooting. Their only hope was to try and stun them all and perhaps then he'd be able to talk some sense into Wasco. Truthfully he didn't like their chances. These were men and women trained for exactly this kind of thing. And far better than regular Starfleet officers like him and Deen or a diplomat turned soldier like Gul Belore. Sharval could hold her own in a fight but her security training had most likely not prepared her to fight Marines in combat.

Five tense minutes passed with barely a sound coming from outside other than the soft trickle of rain against the buildings tin roof. Even the agitated animals could no longer be heard, either because they had calmed down or because they had long since fled the scene.

Lying flat on her belly next to him, with her pistol pointed at the entrance below, Deen ventured a cautiously optimistic look towards her captain. "Maybe they're not coming."

Two small cylindrical devices rolled through the torn-down doors.

Owens needed a second to figure out what they were. By then it was already too late. He tried to shout out a warning even while he diverted his eyes.

The explosion turned his vision into a sheet of white nothingness and caused his ears to ring painfully, unable to hear anything but a terrible high-pitched screech. He felt a sudden sickness building in the pit of his stomach. He forced himself to ignore it all and opened fire, unable to see or hear clearly, he could only hope he was getting the general direction right.

When his senses slowly returned, he could hear additional weapon's fire having joined his own. He could see figures taking shape below but they were nothing more than dim outlines in the foggy surroundings which had become his world. He did his best to aim at them anyway.

He heard a loud grunt coming from the other side of the barn and when he looked up he saw a figure doubling over and falling from the upper level. Michael felt a sense of momentary panic, hoping it hadn't been Sharval who had been hit.

Then he felt the ground underneath him suddenly give way. Somebody, he wasn't sure if it hadn't been the Marines or one of his own people, had hit another support strut, possibly by accident.

"Hold on!" He felt gravity take hold of the ledge as it went tumbling towards the floor below.

The impact was painful but had been softened by large bales of hay located all over the barn. He heard a lot of scrambling and did the same when he realized that the entire upper level was coming crashing down on them. He somehow managed to keep hold of his rifle and stumbled back onto his feet once he thought he was in the clear.

His vision was almost back to normal now and one of the first things he spotted was a Marine who must have jumped out of the way of the collapsing upper deck and who was trying to pull herself back up.

Owens didn't hesitate and struck her right in her solar plexus before following up with another hit close to her neck as she bent over, causing the woman to collapse back to the ground. He wasn't proud of it but he knew that she wouldn't have hesitated doing the same.

A second Marine stood nearby, still distracted by the destruction all around him and Michael quickly drew a bead. His weapon however refused to fire, either because it was old and out of regular use or out of energy, he wasn't sure. And he had no time to check as he threw himself at the man, dragging him down with him.

He tried to knock him out quickly with a blow to the head but Michael only managed one good hit before the other man brought up his arms to block him and protect himself.

It was only then that Michael realized that trying to take on a man who must have spent the better part of his day training for pretty much exactly this kind of situation, who had to be at least ten years younger and was in far better shape had not been his best ever idea.

The Marine struck back with the heel of his palm and the force of the blow nearly caused Michael into unconsciousness. He hung on but couldn't stop the Marine from trying to get off his back.

They rolled across the barn floor, knocking over another Marine in the process, almost like a bowling pin, and until they hit one of the animal berths with Owens still on top but purely by sheer luck.

The Marine got out his knife but Michael managed to knock it out of his hand before he had a chance to bring it to bear. In doing so he couldn't stop the man's other hand grabbing hold of his neck, squeezing it with an impressively firm grip.

But before the Marine could prove that he was able to throttle a man with a single hand, Owens felt another hand grasping his shoulder, pulling him off the Marine with such force he landed on his back a dozen feet or so away.

When he looked up again he recognized the blue face of Sergeant Thelos glancing down at him. He placed his heavy boot on his chest and applied pressure. Still feeling the pain of being nearly choked to death, the boot pressing down on his torso made it very difficult to breathe. Thelos had a large smirk on his face, revealing rows of white teeth as he leveled his phaser rifle, the business end pointing directly at his head. Here was a man who clearly took far too much pleasure from his job.

There was nothing Michael could do to stop him and he knew even if that rifle had been set on stun, a direct hit to his head, at this close a distance, did not give him a great chance of survival. Judging by his amused facial expression, Thelos was aware of this. And more, he appeared pretty damn ready to pull that trigger.

He didn't get a chance as he was struck by an energy beam from behind, causing his eyes to open wide for a brief second just before he sagged to the floor not far from where he had pinned down Owens.

Michael quickly looked around to find which of his allies he had to thank for this timely intervention.

It turned out to be Major Wasco who quickly turned his weapon on the two other still conscious Marines. The man with whom Owens had tussled and who was getting back onto his feet and another woman who had been knocked over during their struggle and who also looked ready to rejoin the fight. "Stand down and drop your weapons. I won't say it twice. Do it now."

The two Marines appeared confused for a moment, unsure why Wasco seemed to have turned on them but when they spotted the determined look in his eyes, they decided not to take chances and followed his instructions.

Owens pulled himself back up very slowly, feeling most of the muscles in his body strained or bruised. But he also felt a great sense of relieve when he spotted Deen and Sharval emerge from the debris, covered in cuts and bruises but otherwise not appearing seriously injured. He couldn't immediately see Belore anywhere.

Sharval still had her own weapon and quickly drew a bead on Wasco.

Owens raised his hand in her direction to stop her from firing. A coughing fit didn't let him speak right away. "It's alright." He glanced at the major. "I'm pretty sure he's on our side."

He had not left his station since he had returned from the surface of Yarra III and Mahoney had ordered them to chase down the Cardassian warp trails, ostensibly left behind by the pirates following their vicious attack on the Thulian colony, leaving it completely annihilated. And yet it weren't those warp trails that had caught Leva's attention as he ran a third computer simulation in a row to verify his results.

Had he been on *Eagle* he would have run his findings by somebody like Xylion or Deen but *Sacajawea* really didn't have any experienced science officers on board, a position which hadn't been in high demand during the war, and the only other person he thought somewhat qualified to look over what he had discovered had pretty much done her best to avoid him since they've had their little talk in the turbolift earlier.

He turned away from his station when Alendra spoke up suddenly. "Commander, I've lost the warp trail."

Noticing that Mahoney was not currently on the bridge, Leva stood from his station and headed towards the center chair but decided against sitting in it, remaining by its side instead. "Ensign, drop out of warp. Full stop."

"Aye, sir, coming to a full stop," said T'Sara, the Vulcan woman at the helm.

"Same as before?"

Alendra nodded. "Yes, sir. It just vanished. I don't think it's due to regular decay either."

Leva considered that for a moment. It was the second warp trail they had followed and which had ended quite suddenly for no discernible reason. As the Bolian had rightly pointed out, warp trails weren't all that reliable and tended to degrade quickly. They were often not a dependable way of chasing down starships. While one could fairly accurately determine which direction a ship had taken initially, as an experienced tactical officer, Leva knew that if you were trying to hide, you'd throw off any pursuers easily by carrying out multiple, random course changes before settling on your actual destination. It hadn't stopped Mahoney from still trying his luck.

What was unusual here however was the fact that the warp trails hadn't just degraded. They had simply vanished.

"Can you register any possible pirate vessels in sensor range? Or are there any locations along this course which may lend themselves as a hiding place?"

Alendra checked her instruments. "None, sir. It's pretty much clear space for the next ten light-years."

He didn't miss her clipped tone or the fact that she refused to even make eye contact with him.

The doors to the adjacent ready room opened to allow Mahoney to step onto the bridge. "Why have we stopped? Did we find something?"

Leva shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Just another warp trail leading us nowhere."

The captain glanced at the screen as if he could spot something there. Of course warp trails, even if one still existed, were invisible to the naked eye. "Damn."

Leva glanced at the captain. "I'm starting to believe that these trails have been faked. The way they simply terminate is very suspicious."

"You can do that?"

"With some ingenuity it's not too difficult to fake warp trails. It's perhaps not something I would have expected from a group of pirates using outdated Cardassian technology but it certainly is possible."

"Alright, so we need a new plan."

Leva headed back to his station. "I might have something." He took his chair and went back to work, quickly noticing that the results of his latest simulation had come back positive. "While we had the uplink with *Eagle* I helped myself to some of their data they've collected on the pirate vessels they have encountered."

Mahoney joined him, looking over his shoulder at his screen. "Well done, Commander. But how does that help us tracking down these pirates?"

Leva activated a few controls to send his data to the large main screen at the front of the bridge. The empty starscape on the viewer was replaced with a three dimensional tactical map of the sector they were currently occupying. *Sacajawea's* position was highlighted by a Starfleet chevron at its center.

"I've had the computer analyze the approach and departure vectors of the ships *Eagle* has encounter and compared them to the ones we have

dealt with as well as with the warp trails from the ships left behind at Yarra III."

They both turned to look at the screen which now showed the locations of all four pirate encounters, along with green and red paths which indicated the directions the pirates had most likely taken.

"I think we may be able to extrapolate the general location of their base of operations. The only problem is that the warp trails leaving Yarra III do not match the others at all." Leva pointed at the screen to show that the trails they had been following were taking them into an entirely different direction.

Mahoney studied the screen closely. "So they've been trying to throw us off their scent. That's hardly surprising."

"It is certainly a possibility. But if we were to disregard Yarra III altogether, we get this." Leva entered a few more commands and removed the former Thulian colony from the equation. The remaining pirate paths all seemed to originate from the far upper quadrant of the map which was highlighted by a bright white border.

Mahoney smirked. "Maybe we got too close and they used Yarra III to try and confuse us. I think we need to focus on that region of space."

"Sir, that is still a very large area," said Alendra who had obviously listened to every word. "It would take two starships a week to search it all."

But Leva shook his head as he went back to work. "My thoughts are that as these pirates have only been operating for a short while, they likely didn't have the time to build any significant structures and therefore would have chosen a location which would offer a suitable environment. We know from the prisoner *Eagle* has taken that they are most likely made up of oxygen breathing humanoids."

"A class-M planet?"

Leva nodded. "I think so. There are five class-M worlds in that area of space." After operating a few more controls, the five different worlds were highlighted on the map. "I believe we can safely rule out Onessias IV, it is too distant considering the speed and range of the ships the pirates are using. Iora II is also unlikely as it is home to a planet-wide industrialized civilization which would make it very difficult to hide amongst the native population. That leaves us with three possible locations."

Mahoney studied those planets on the screen after the two least likely options had been removed. "Merka VII."

"A planet with a harsh climate and high surface temperatures according to our records."

"Reekis?"

Leva nodded. "Could lend itself as a base. It appears to have recently emerged from a global ice age and Starfleet suspects that it was once home to a Breen colony."

"And Mittias IIIb."

The tactical officer stood. "The second moon around a ringed gas giant. There is significant electromagnetic interference throughout the system caused by high levels of gamma rays from a nearby hypernova explosion a few decades ago. It won't affect the planet's surface thanks to its atmosphere but it will render sensors unreliable in the system."

"The perfect hiding spot." Mahoney's grin widened as he focused on the last planet on the map. "That's where we're going to find our pirates, Commander."

"I think you might be right, sir."

The captain turned back to face his first officer. "With those pointed ears of yours one might be forgiven to mistake you for a Vulcan, but your cunningness is all Romulan."

"Half Romulan, sir."

"Whatever it is, I'll take it. Well done, Commander." He headed towards his chair and sat down. "Advise *Eagle* that we have found the pirates likely hideout and to join us without delay so that we may put an end to them for once and for all. Helm, set a course for the second moon of Mittias III. Warp nine."

The barn looked like a war zone after their firefight with the Marines. The entire upper level had come crashing down onto the floor below, destroying more than half of the animal berths and littering the ground with wooden debris. But all considering, Michael Owens actually thought the outcome wasn't all too bad, in fact things could have been much worse. The property damage was a shame of course, but at least nobody had been killed.

Thanks to Wasco's timely intervention, the remaining Marines had been quickly neutralized. And only Belore had apparently been injured. He remained conscious and after making him comfortable on a small stack of hay, Deen had gone to find a medkit to treat his wounds.

In the meantime, Michael had noticed that Sharval was favoring her right arm and appeared to be in pain even if she seemed determined to keep it to herself. "Are you alright?"

She looked up at him from where she was leaning against one of the few remaining support struts. "Perfectly fine."

But he could see that she was not. He stepped up to her and gently touched her shoulder causing her to immediately pull away. It wasn't because she was shy; she had already proven that the opposite was the case. "Stay still and let me have a look at you."

Begrudgingly she followed his instructions and uttered a short gasp of pain when he felt her shoulder again.

"It's dislocated. Must have happened when you fell from that ledge."

"Can you fix it?"

He nodded. "I think so. Your anatomy is fairly similar to mine. But it will hurt."

At that she offered a crooked grin. "I didn't think we would be talking about our anatomies so soon."

He aimed a frown at her.

"Just do it. It already hurts badly enough as it is."

He gently turned her so that her injured shoulder was resting against the support strut. "I thought you said you were perfectly fine?"

Before she had a chance to respond, he pushed her hard into the strut while holding on to her arm and shoulder blade until he heard an audible pop.

She let out a loud and surprised shriek which drew the attention of the others in the barn and then turned and practically collapsed into his arms. "Damn you. A little warning would have been nice."

Now it was his time to smirk as he looked her in the eye, not missing that she was practically holding on to him and pressing herself against him. "Easier that way."

"For you or me?"

"Well, do you feel better?"

She moved her left arm effortlessly. "Looks like that did the trick," she said and playfully looked up at him. "Now, where there some other parts of my anatomy you'd like to discuss?"

It was then that Deen stepped back into the barn with a Federation-issue medkit squeezed under her arm which she had likely found in the Marines' shuttle.

As if caught red-handed while engaged in the most taboo of circumstances, Michael quickly disentangled himself from Sharval.

If Deen had noticed, she didn't let it show. "The monks are fairly displeased that we've used their barn for target practice." She headed straight for the downed Cardassian, took a knee and opened the kit to attempt to treat his injuries. "I managed to calm them down a little and they've agreed to give us some privacy."

Michael stepped up beside her to look at Belore. His sturdy armor had taken the brunt of a phaser blast but not all of it. They had removed the shell-like armor and temporarily dressed the wound with some emergency bandages they had found on one of the Marines. Deen peeled them away slowly to find him still bleeding. "How is he?"

He managed a little, knowing smile. "Perfectly fine, Captain."

Michael rolled his eyes; obviously he had overheard him and Sharval.

"Let's leave the diagnosis to the person with the basic medical training, shall we?" Deen prepped a hypospray and emptied it into his neck. "That should take care of the pain." Next she used the medical tricorder to run a scan and then glanced up at Owens. "Doesn't look like any major organs were affected. It appears to be mostly tissue damage. I

should be able to clean the wound and use a dermal regenerator to close it.”

“So what you’re saying, basically, is that he’ll be perfectly fine?”

Deen shrugged. “Basically.” She turned back towards her patient and began to work on the wound.

Owens offered the Cardassian an encouraging glance. “Looks like you’re in good hands.”

“No argument there.”

He turned away from the patient and his medic and found Major Wasco who had just completed securing Sergeant Thalos who had since recovered from being stunned, as well as three of his Marines. They were all sitting on the floor now and bound in pairs to some of the sturdier berths which had survived the collapse of the upper ledges.

“Major, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad you’re on our side but you had me worried there for a while.”

The broad shouldered Marine turned to look at the captain. “I have to admit that the general made some interesting points but at the end of the day you were right. We have no business remaining on this world. I want to see our people be able to go back home where they can do more good than fighting a war which has already been decided.”

Owens glanced passed him and at the bound Marines – the Andorian especially, to judge if any of those words had registered with them. But all he could find was anger at having been betrayed by one of their own. No doubt Marines took this more personally than most other people.

“I had been on my way to tell you of this in the detention complex.” Wasco shot a piercing stare at Sharval, who was leaning casually against the support strut again considering the major with her own suspicions. “But I never got the chance.”

The Valerian shrugged. “I guess I can get carried away a little bit. But you really expect us to believe that you’re on our side all of a sudden?”

“I’m not sure that I’m on *your* side.” He looked back at Owens. “But I’m on yours, sir. We have orders from Starfleet to bring our people home and those trump any orders from the general, in my opinion.”

Owens responded by giving the man a firm nod and placing a hand on his shoulder.

But Sharval still didn’t look convinced and walked over to the injured Cardassian who Deen had nearly fully patched up again. She found his

discarded armor nearby and the suspicion in her eyes became noticeably more pronounced.

Owens could see it too. "What is it?"

She picked up the black armor and showed him the hole in the chest piece from the phaser blast. Then she dropped it and found one of the Marine's phaser rifles. Michael recognized it to be the same Sergeant Thalos had wielded earlier and which had come dangerously close to taking off his head. After inspecting it she aimed an accusatory glare at the major. "What exactly were you planning to do here? This weapon is set to kill."

Wasco looked confused. "I gave strict orders for all weapons to be set on stun." He indicated for Sharval to show him the weapon but when she refused to hand it over he picked up one of the others and judging by his facial expression, he was surprised by what he found. He whirled angrily on Thalos. "Explain yourself, Sergeant. You disregarded a direct order. Why?"

But the Andorian simply glared back, his own anger and despise written all over his blue face.

"Clearly he was following other orders." The Valerian walked up to the prisoners. "Orders which superseded yours. And I bet they weren't in a sharing kind of mood. Isn't that right?" She pushed the muzzle of the rifle against the side of Thalos' head.

Wasco wasn't entirely able to contain his fury. "Who gave you that order, Marine?"

Sharval kept her eyes on the Andorian. "I think that much is obvious, don't you think?"

"I want to hear him say it."

Thalos looked as if he'd rather wait for a hot day on Andor before answering the questions of a traitor.

Owens didn't have that kind of patience. "You do realize that if this is true, you followed an illegal order? I don't know, perhaps if you're lucky a court martial may come down on your side of this, but if you refuse to talk, you're the one who will go down for the attempted murder of fellow Starfleet officers."

The Andorian didn't look at Owens but kept his brimming eyes on Wasco instead. "It came from the general," he said. "Captain Owens and the Cardassian were not to come back alive."

Wasco turned away disgusted at what he had heard a fellow Marine admit to.

Belore managed to stand with Deen's help. "I'm not sure if I should be flattered or outraged. I suppose I'm mostly surprised. Appears to me Starfleet officers aren't quite as noble as they like to make the rest of the galaxy believe."

Owens regarded the Cardassian with a dark scowl. He wanted to point out that Lam wasn't really a Starfleet officer. That he was a Marine and that Marines thought and acted differently. But then he realized that it would have been a poor excuse and an insult to Wasco and the vast majority of the Marines who would never have dreamed of scooping to such a disturbing level. It confirmed however his theory that after two years fighting on this world, Lam had lost all perspective in his obsessive need to win his war. That he had to be stopped at any cost.

He heard the slight whine of a phaser rifle charging up and he turned to see that Sharval had taken a few steps backwards and leveled the weapon at the four prisoners. "What are you doing?"

"I told you before, they don't try to kill me; I won't try to kill them. Clearly things have changed."

Deen took a step forward. "We don't execute prisoners."

Sharval was unmoved. "So instead we do nothing while they keep coming after us trying to put us down? I don't think so."

Wasco raised his own weapon, pointing it at the Valerian. "I will not allow you to do that."

This in turn prompted Owens to pick up a rifle. He found himself torn whom to target. He glanced at Sharval without taking aim. "Lower your weapon. We're not killing anyone."

"You need to start deciding whose side your on, Sky Knight." She kept her weapon on those Marines as she spoke. "You want to come out of all this with your hands clean but it just doesn't work like that. Not when we're up against this."

"She's right," said Belore. "We need to start thinking like our enemy."

But Owens shook his head. "These people are not our enemy."

The Valerian regarded him with an incredulous look. "So it is perfectly normal then for your friends to try and kill you, is it? I suppose we live on different worlds after all."

The captain made sure his rifle was set to stun and then took aim at Sharval. "It's Lam who's trying to kill us."

"Through his men."

"Make no mistake," Wasco said. "If you do not lower your weapon in the next five seconds I will shoot you."

And so for a moment, or at the very least, for the next five seconds, they appeared to be at a stalemate. Sharval determined to kill the Marines, Wasco determined to shoot her before she had the chance and Owens stuck in the middle.

He made his choice before Wasco's ultimatum was up. He lowered his own rifle and very slowly stepped towards her, blocking Wasco's line of fire in the process. "You don't want to do this. You're not a killer."

She looked him in the eye. "You don't know me that well."

"I know that you could have killed Major Wasco and the other Marines when you rescued us but you didn't do that. I know that you could have killed a great number of them when you bombed those barracks but you made sure there wouldn't be any fatalities, didn't you? It would be much easier to fight an uncompromising war against the Marines but you've decided that you didn't want that. Because it's not who you are."

"Because if I did that, they'd turn against my people." She kept her rifle firmly on her target.

Owens stepped directly in front of her, fully aware that it meant her rifle was now pointing at his chest. "I don't believe that's the only reason. I believe you want to free your people but you want your own hands to remain clean as well. Besides, if you start killing these men, you might still get the one thing you wanted to avoid. A full-out war on the Valerians."

She locked eyes with him then, ironclad determination still written all over her face. Then it began to waver and she threw down the rifle with noticeable frustration. "Why must you be so irritably rational all the time? Tell me, are all Starfleet captains this annoying or is it just you?"

"It's one of our more endearing qualities." He stepped closer to her, offering a little smile. "But I always thought I had most of my fellow peers beat in that regard."

She mirrored his move and also took a step forward, getting so close in fact that she was able to press her palm against his chest. "Must be what I find so irresistibly interesting about you."

Owens heard Deen clear her throat and then, realizing how close they had gotten, quickly stepped away again. He found her looking rather displeased by the way in which he had talked her down. He wasn't sure if it was because he had put himself in front of a deadly weapon or if it was related to the more personal touch that had followed.

Wasco had lowered his own rifle now and didn't seem to care one-way or the other.

The Cardassian couldn't entirely hide an amused smirk even if he had taken Sharval's side earlier. "So what happens now? No doubt General Lam will come looking for his people and seeing that we have decided to do the noble thing and not get rid of them, he will find them. Which means we can't be anywhere near here when their friends arrive."

Owens nodded and then indicated for Wasco and the others to follow him into the far corner of the barn from where they could keep an eye out on their prisoners but where they were out of earshot. He still believed that their best plan of action was taking out the power plant and thereby denying Lam the one key element he required to continue his war. He explained this much to the major.

Wasco nodded. "The general did mention a new fusion plant to go operational in the next few days. He has a major offensive planned against Cardassian-held territory as soon as he can secure enough energy for weapons and equipment. He is convinced that it is the first step to securing a final victory on Valeria."

Deen glanced at Owens with noticeable concern. "No wonder he was so eager for us to help him finish this plant of his."

"Perhaps we should just let all this play out," said Wasco. "If the general is right and he can secure a victory and the Cardassians surrender, the war will be over."

Belore didn't like the sound of this and shook his head. "The war is already over, Major. I'm not willing to accept any more Cardassian casualties just so that your general can get a sense of closure and accomplishment. Besides, what if Metral won't surrender so quickly? My people tend to fight to the last man if their commanders demand as much."

Sharval agreed. "And any large scale offensive like this is bound to cause significant collateral damage. I've seen this before. The last time both sides through everything they had at each other, hundreds of my people ended up in the crossfire."

Owens nodded. "We have to find a way to end this war before Lam can go on the offensive." He looked at the only Marine amongst them, fully cognizant that he had defended the general before. "Major, I need to be sure that you are on our side on this. That you will do whatever it takes to end this war. With as little bloodshed as possible."

To this credit the man neither blinked nor hesitated. "You have my word, sir. You are my commanding officer and my loyalty is unquestionably to you."

Michael decided that that was good enough for him and gave the major a curt nod.

"But considering how significant this plant is to the general's plans, it will be very difficult to try and get passed its defenses with just the five of us."

"We've already had a look at it ourselves." Deen glanced from Wasco to Owens. "And I have to agree with the major on that one."

The captain was not yet willing to give up however. "I realize that. What we need is to get Lam's men on our side and make them see that they are fighting for a pointless cause."

Sharval looked back at their prisoners and Owens followed her glance. They still looked defiant and Thalos in particular appeared eager to get a shot at Wasco's throat. Owens nodded as he understood the difficulty of getting Marines to turn against their commanding general. "We won't have any luck trying to get random Marines on our side. What we need is somebody influential. A senior officer. Somebody who could challenge Lam's authority." He aimed a meaningful look at Wasco.

The man immediately shook his head. "Not me, sir. We may all be Marines but these men consider me an outsider. There is no chance I could sway the numbers we would need away from General Lam."

Judging by the murderous look in the Andorian's eyes, Michael tended to agree. "Fair enough. But there must be somebody else? There are over one hundred thousand Marines stationed on this world and I refuse to believe that everyone here is willing to blindly follow Lam once they realize that they are fighting a war which has already ended."

Wasco considered that for a moment before he began nodding slowly. "There might be somebody. We used to be close friends and we both served under Lam during the Border Wars. She's a lieutenant colonel now and commands First Battalion from a forward operating base. I had meant to seek her out when I realized she was stationed here."

Sharval did not like this idea at all. "You cannot be serious? These are the people who are trying to kill us and you're suggesting we just stroll right into one of their bases? We might as well lay down our weapons now and wait for Lam to execute us all."

The Marine ignored her and instead looked at Owens. "I cannot guarantee that she'll turn against Lam. He was as much a mentor to her as he was to me. But she'll listen to us. She owes me that much."

Owens considered their options for a moment until he came to realize that they didn't really have many of those left. If they wanted any chance at standing up to Lam and forcing him to end this war, they needed support and from what Wasco had told him, his friend was perhaps their best chance of providing it. "I suppose we're going to find out."

## PART V

### THE UNEASY TRUTH

#### 1

“Explain to me again why we are chasing freighters?”

Star shot the man sitting next to her on the bridge a sidelong look. “Because something about Yarra III doesn’t sit right with me. John Doe categorically denied that his people were responsible and seems to believe the answers to my questions may be on those freighters.”

“And this is the same John Doe which you detained for piracy?” Katanga offered an incredulous look in response. “The same man who was entirely unwilling to cooperate or give us as much as his real name?”

She didn’t respond to this. He damn well knew it was the same man.

“And we’re trusting pirates now?” He continued when she wouldn’t humor him.

“Wasn’t it you who told me I needed to reconsider my approach?”

He nodded. “Yes. But that was in relation to not knocking the man unconscious in his own cell. I didn’t suggest we go chasing down starships on his say so.”

Star shrugged. “Call it a hunch then.”

“Oh boy, I remember Dezwin’s hunches. They usually involved somebody ending up inside a brig. And that was usually the two of us.”

She cracked a smile when she remembered Star’s previous host’s escapades with a much younger Elijah Katanga. The two had indeed been fast friends and some of their adventures together had involved a fair share of run-ins with security or other law enforcement agencies. Her smile turned mischievous as she regarded him once more. “If I remember correctly those misfortunate incidents were as much on your head as they were on his.”

“The folly of youth.”

Star sighed. “Tell me about it.” Then she stood. “Lieutenant Stanmore, time until we intercept the freighter?”

The blonde-haired operations officer checked his instruments. "Ten minutes, sir."

She turned to the tactical officer next. "Still no response to our hails?"

The Vulcan shook his head fractionally. "None, sir."

"Why would they just ignore us?"

Nobody on the bridge had an answer but Katanga, who tended to have one ready for most every question. "Perhaps they're just not the talkative type."

It had been meant in jest, Star was sure, but it was probably not too far from the truth. The Thulians after all were a secretive people. Sure, they were active in interstellar trade but even then they kept strictly to themselves, hardly ever making contact with outsiders. As far as she was aware they hadn't even allowed the Federation to establish an embassy or a consulate on their world. If nothing else, Mahoney should have considered himself very lucky that they had decided to open a dialogue with him. If that man hadn't been so misguided and obsessed, she was sure Starfleet would have been quite pleased with his efforts of making contact with a previously secluded race.

"Commander, we are receiving a signal."

She turned back towards the Vulcan. "From the freighter?"

"The *Sacajawea*, sir."

She suppressed a heavy sigh.

The tactical officer checked his console. "Text only, sir. Captain Mahoney is advising that he believes that they have successfully determined the location of the pirate base of operations. He is requesting that *Eagle* joins *Sacajawea* in the Mittias system to assist efforts to neutralize the base."

Star listened but didn't respond.

Katanga stood and walked towards her, making sure he was close enough to keep his voice low. "Last time you ignored Mahoney it didn't go too well."

She nodded. That much was certain. Then she looked back at Trinik. "Lieutenant, acknowledge receipt of the message and advise that we will join them shortly."

"Yes, sir."

"No mention of our little chase?" Katanga said.

"Something tells me he wouldn't like that very much."

"Imagine that." Katanga went back to his chair to sit down.

"Commander, we're approaching the freighter." Lance Stanmore briefly glanced back at her. "Its speed is unchanged and remains a steady warp four."

She nodded and regarded the helmsman next. The young Andorian woman, Srena, held that station presently. "Ensign, get us as close as possible without us looking too much of a threat and then match their speed."

Srena swiveled her chair towards the commander. "Without looking like a threat?"

"Just approach them gently. Creep up nice and slow."

The Andorian offered a smirk before she turned back to her station. "Creeping up slowly, sir."

Next Star looked at her Vulcan science and acting first officer who was sitting in her usual chair next to the one at the center. She pointed towards the science console at the back of the bridge and he understood, following her to the aft station. There he took a seat while she remained behind him, looking over his shoulder. "Commander, I'd like you to initiate an intensive scan of that vessel. I want to know the color of the bolts they use inside their warp core."

Xylion looked up at her, one eyebrow slightly arched. "Sir, such a scan will very likely be considered intrusive by the crew of that freighter."

"Do it anyway."

He held her look for only a brief moment longer before acquiescing to her wishes and using *Eagle's* powerful sensory equipment to probe every square inch of the vessel traveling not too far from their own bow.

Star could quickly see that he wasn't having a great deal of success.

"The freighter is heavily shielded, Commander. Sensors are not able to reliably penetrate its outer hull."

"Now that's suspicious."

Xylion turned and regarded her again. "Not at all. Most Thulian vessels possess reinforced armor which makes it difficult to scan their interior. As you may be aware, the Thulians hold their privacy in the highest regard."

She couldn't tell if the subtext to his words was an indication that he agreed with such notions of privacy or if he disagreed with her attempts to ignore their customs by prying into their affairs. Or quite possibly both.

"Sir, the freighter is hailing us. Audio only."

She looked at the other Vulcan on the bridge and nodded. "Let's hear

it.”

*“Attention Starfleet vessel. We have detected your attempts to scan our ship. Note that this gesture is not welcomed. Please state your intentions.”* The disembodied voice sounded distinctly robotic and Star wasn’t sure if this was their natural voice or an artifact of the universal translator.

“This is Commander Tazla Star of the USS *Eagle*. We are carrying out a random inspection of freighters in this sector. As we are unable to verify your cargo with sensors, we will need to board your vessel instead.”

The voice responded with no delay. *“That is not acceptable. We will provide you with a full cargo manifest for you to review.”*

Star stood a little straighter and shook her head even if the other party wasn’t able to see this. “That will not be enough, I’m afraid. Please drop out of warp, come to a full stop and prepare for an inspection.”

The voice remained infuriatingly calm. *“Starfleet lacks any jurisdiction in this area of space to carry out an inspection of our vessel.”*

Annoyed Star signaled Trinik to mute the channel.

When she looked at Xylion he offered a minuscule nod. “They are correct. We are outside Federation territory. We cannot carry out a legal inspection of their vessel without their consent.”

“There must be some sort loophole we could exploit.”

Xylion only needed to think for a second. “Technically speaking as their stated destination is within Federation space we could invoke a rarely used provision which would allow us to stop any vessel heading towards Federation held territory which is suspected to carry dangerous or illegal cargo. But we do not have any probable cause to —”

It was enough for Star and she indicated to Trinik to reopen the channel. “Thulian vessel, you are being inspected on the suspicion of transporting dangerous cargo into Federation space. So I say again, come to and prepare to be boarded.”

There wasn’t an immediate reply and Star suspected that perhaps they were looking up the very provision she had just based her actions on.

*“Eagle, we will be altering our flight plan and this vessel will no longer be heading towards Federation territory. As such you have no reason to carry out an inspection.”*

She stopped herself short from uttering a shout of frustration. They truly didn’t want anyone coming aboard their ship and would go as far as abandoning their cargo run, most likely losing a significant amount of investment in time and resources doing so. Star didn’t care. She was

committed now. "Thulian vessel, you have thirty seconds to come about or we will be forced to take measures to stop you." The implication was obvious. Pull over now or find out how quickly a *Nebula*-class cruiser could disable a lightly armed freighter.

The voice that responded remained calm as ever even considering the threat Star had just leveled against them. *"We will do as you request as you have given us no other choice. However, do note that we will issue a formal complaint to the Federation Council over your inappropriate and possibly illegal actions."*

Trinik advised that the channel had been closed from the other end.

"Good luck with that," Star said to nobody. "How do you make a complaint if you don't even maintain formal diplomatic relations?"

"Last time I checked, the absence of relations isn't a right to bully others."

She ignored Katanga. "Commander Star to Lieutenant Nora."

*"Nora here. Go ahead, Commander."*

"Lieutenant, I need you to lead a team to board and inspect a Thulian freighter we are in the process of stopping."

The security chief took a moment to respond and Star thought she knew why. After all this wasn't exactly a routine procedure for this ship. *"We are inspecting freighters now? Commander, with all due respect, you're not in the Border Service anymore. This isn't really our thing."*

She was right about that of course. Starfleet ships rarely carried out such inspections. This was usually left to the Border Service which specialized in this kind of activity with a fleet of dedicated cutters and personnel. And Nora was right about something else as well, Star had served in the Border Service once before. What the Bajoran probably didn't know however, was the fact that she had carried out very few inspections while there. In fact she had never even set foot on a border cutter. Her assignment to Starfleet's less prestigious branch had really been on paper only. "It is today, Lieutenant."

Star could almost hear her soundless sigh. *"Fine. What are we looking for?"*

"I don't know yet."

*"That's not helping."*

"Just take a close look at their cargo. Let me know if you find any inconsistencies or any suspicious items. Star out." She closed the channel before the matter could escalate into an argument.

She spotted Xylion's eyes on her. If he had been anything other than a Vulcan she would have called them doubtful. If she was honest with herself, so was she. That was the problem with playing a hunch.

Within minutes the freighter had finally dropped out of warp and come to a complete standstill to allow *Eagle* to transport a six-man inspection team led by Nora Laas and consisting out of five security guards and specialists. Star had decided against sending a heavily armed unit or even the Marines like they may have done in the Border Service. She figured she was on thin enough ice as it was by bending regulations close to the breaking point. No need to aggravate the situation further by sending a fully-fledged boarding party and being accused of intimidation tactics. She didn't expect the Thulians to cause trouble with a Starfleet cruiser parked just off their starboard bow.

"Lieutenant Nora reports that her team is ready to beam onto the freighter," said Lance Stanmore still sitting at operations.

Star nodded but before she could give the go ahead, Trinik spoke up. "Sir, we are receiving another message from the *Sacajawea*. Captain Mahoney is advising that under no circumstances should we board the Thulian freighter. He is further instructing us to join his efforts to eliminate the pirate base with no further delay."

Star balled her right hand into a fist and fought an urge to bring it down hard onto the armrest. A good thing to as she very well might have smashed it to pieces. "How the seven hells did he found out about this so quickly?"

"I'm assuming the Thulians told him." Katanga considered Star sitting at his side again very carefully as if to judge her reaction to this most unexpected and unwelcome development. "It sounded to me like a direct order, Taz."

She clenched her teeth angrily. Yes, he was right. It was. Of course Mahoney didn't know what she knew as she had not let him in on any of her thoughts or suspicions since they had investigated Yarra III and spoken to John Doe. It didn't matter of course. She knew that he wouldn't care what she thought either way. In fact he would have adopted a contrary opinion on the matter just because he loathed the idea of agreeing with her on anything. There was little point to even try. He wanted things done his way and without argument.

"Nora to Star. Are we doing this or not?"

The Trill glanced at the ceiling for a moment as if the security chief was located somewhere above her. She was fully cognizant that not following orders had been what had caused her disgrace and downfall to begin with and she couldn't deny a certain sense of déjà vu, even if the circumstances weren't really the same. Was she truly willing to make the same mistakes all over again and give Mahoney just the reason he needed to fulfill his spiteful objective? In fact if she went against his orders now she might even do the job for him. He could get his way and have her drummed out of Starfleet without even having to sully or endanger his own career.

Katanga could apparently tell the struggle which was playing out in her mind and he leaned over the armrest separating them. "If you didn't have any history with this man," he said quietly. "If he wasn't on a personal quest to destroy you, what is it you'd do in this situation?"

She looked at him. "I'd follow my instincts. I'd go ahead with this."

"I told you before, don't let your history with that man dictate your actions."

She sucked in a lungful of air and then nodded.

*"Nora to Commander Star. No offense, but would you kindly let me know –*

*"Lieutenant, you are cleared to board that vessel."*

*"Understood. Nora out."*

She let out a heavy breath, trying hard not to think of the consequences of having once again disregarded a direct order from a superior officer.

She soon came to regret her decision. After twenty minutes of nervously drumming her fingers on her armrest, Nora came back on the line.

*"We've searched this ship from bow to stern, Commander but have not been able to locate anything that seems even a little bit suspicious."*

Star came close to uttering a particularly nasty Trill curse. "There must be something."

*"We may not be Border Dogs but we do know how to search a ship. There are no hidden compartments, no holographic walls or fake cargo containers. We even looked for dimensionally shifted phenomena. Nothing. It's all here and exactly as it is on the manifest."*

Star nodded, trying desperately not to lose hope. She understood that all this would become so much worse for her if her hunch had not paid off. "Alright, Lieutenant, tell me what is on the ship then."

*"We've got a lot of duranium, some dilithium, self-sealing stembolts, parts for a couple of industrial replicators, duridium ore and various other raw materials."*

"What is their stated destination?"

Nora conferred with a crewmember before responding. *"It's all intended for the Nehru colony."*

Star knew that the Federation world of Nehru had been devastated by the Dominion during the war and was most likely undergoing heavy reconstruction efforts. And that manifest read pretty much exactly like what that colony would need to rebuild. She got out of her chair and walked back towards the science station finding that Xylion was still sitting there. "Lieutenant, have the Thulians transfer over their complete manifest and flight path and stand by. Star out." It took less than a couple of minutes until the requested information popped up on Xylion's screen. "Have a look at the manifest with those studious Vulcan eyes of yours. Does anything appear suspicious to you?"

Xylion consider all the data for just a brief moment. "No, sir. The manifest contains no anomalies and has been prepared in line with Federation shipping guidelines."

Star sighed and turned back towards the screen where she could spot the wedge-shaped Thullian cargo ship which refused to be anything other than what it appeared.

A tone from the tactical console indicated another incoming signal and Trinik turned to regard Star. "Sir, Captain Mahoney is requesting an update on our ETA."

"Tell Mahoney that he can..." she stopped herself before she could say something she would have regretted uttering out loud and in front of the crew. Considering the nature of Vulcans, she wouldn't have been surprised if Trinik would have sent her words verbatim. She didn't need to give the man any more reasons to get her court martialed again. She'd already given him more than enough.

The tactical officer considered her with a somewhat quizzical expression, clearly awaiting the second part of her instructions.

"The flight path is not entirely efficient."

Star whirled back around towards the science station and Xylion upon hearing his words. She quickly placed herself next to him. "Say again?"

He indicated towards the freighter's flight path marked by a bright yellow line on his screen. "The flight path is not the most efficient route between Ultima Thule and the Nehru colony."

"Have they noted any other stops along their route?"

"Negative." He worked at his console again and a second path was displayed on the screen, this one clearly a much more direct route to their destination. "This is the most efficient route between their point of origin and their final destination. At present the Thulians stand to lose four point eight days by following their chosen route."

"I can't imagine they are such lousy navigators." Star leaned closer to get a better look at the screen. She noticed that the variation in their route was bringing them fairly close to a star system they'd otherwise have avoided easily. She thought it looked familiar and she pointed at it. "What system is this?"

"That is the Valerian star system."

Star shot Xylion a surprised look. "The same system in which Starfleet and Cardassian troops have been fighting a ground war for the last two years. The same system our pirate prisoner hails from. That's too much of a coincidence."

"However it may be just that."

She shook her head. "I don't believe it." Then she headed back towards her chair to join Katanga.

"What do you think it all means?"

"I don't know yet but I intend to find out. Something's going on here we're not seeing." But she also understood that she didn't have all the pieces yet and until she did, she had no choice but to follow her orders. Or at very least pretend to go along with them. "Lieutenant Stanmore, get Nora and her team back on board. Trinik, advise the *Sacajawea* that we are on our way. Srena, set a course for the Mattis system and engage at maximum warp as soon as our people are back on board. Something tells me that we may find the last puzzle piece there."

Michael understood that they had to move fast. Their only advantage at the moment was the fact that General Lam didn't know that Wasco had switched sides. Therefore he had been able to send a message back to the embassy to make the general believe that he and his search team had come up empty handed at the monastery and that they were moving on to their next location to try and apprehend the fugitive Starfleet officers and Gul Belore.

Instead they were planning on commandeering the Marine shuttle— it had taken Deen only a few minutes to locate its transponder and make it transmit false data—to use it to make the trip to Forward Operating Command Phoenix, a Marine base located almost four-thousand miles south from the capital and close to Cardassian-held territory. Phoenix was the headquarters of Lieutenant Colonel Svea van der Meer and her First Battalion, a close friend of Wasco's, and according to the major, just about the only senior officer on Valeria who might be willing to ask questions first and shoot later at anyone suggesting turning against General Xiaogang Lam.

It was a huge gamble of course but as far as Michael was concerned, it was one of their only remaining chances to see this war end quickly and bloodlessly.

"I don't understand why I cannot wear that uniform and you be the prisoner." Sharval had made it clear that she was not crazy about the idea of trying to appeal to other Marines, the very same people who were responsible for bringing this war to her world in the first place. She appreciated their plan of having her and Belore act as prisoners in order to get close to the base even less.

"I think it's pretty obvious." Owens zipped up a tactical vest over the combat fatigues he now wore. They had borrowed the uniforms from two of their own prisoners they had left tied up in the barn. They had been understandably reluctant to part with their clothes and Michael had provided them their civilian attire instead so he didn't have to rob them of their dignity as well. It hadn't helped to improve their mood much. "Starfleet doesn't have any Valerian Marines as far as I know. You would stand out far too much, defeating the purpose of our little charade."

She smirked. "I do tend to stand out wherever I go. Can't help that I've been blessed with such great natural beauty." She winked at Deen who stood nearby and who was also finishing up pulling on the combat equipment. "I believe you understand what a curse that can be, don't you, dear?"

Deen offered a minuscule nod but not much else. Even though Deen most likely understood perfectly and much more so than Sharval could ever imagine. It didn't take much to realize that the young woman didn't much care for the condescending tone. Or perhaps, Michael thought, there was more to what Deen found objectionable about the Valerian woman.

Sharval didn't pay the Tenarian any further attention and instead focused on Owens again as they prepared to board the shuttle. "Did I mention that I believe this is a horrible idea?"

Belore shot her a brief glance. "Many times." "Good. Because I want it to be known that this is incredibly foolish. First of all, little princess over there doesn't look anything like a Marine. She's far too young." She indicated back towards Deen who responded with a scowl.

Michael had to admit that she was right. Even after putting up her glowing golden locks and hiding them inside her helmet, Deen looked far too petite to be a Marine. And her peaceful and alluring aura didn't exactly lend itself to a person trained as a warrior either.

"And second, I may not know much about your people's culture but in mine, the notion of fooling soldiers with fake prisoners is a terribly obvious ploy. Nobody is going to fall for this."

"We don't need to fool everyone. We just need to get close enough to Phoenix so that we can speak to van der Meer." Wasco of course didn't have to fake being anything other than himself and seemed the most confident in this plan.

Owens nodded. "Exactly. Just play your part and we should be alright." Then he boarded the shuttle along with the others, not missing that Sharval was the last person to step inside and even then only hesitantly.

Once he was sure she had taken a seat on one of the benches lining the bulkheads in the back, he took the chair next to Wasco who would pilot the vessel towards the Marine base.

With little further delay the major had the main hatch secured, took off gently and pointed the shuttle's nose southward. To reduce their chance

of detection he kept the shuttle fairly low, less than two hundred feet over the ground and their speed just below breaking the sound barrier.

It would mean of course that people on the ground could easily spot them but hopefully the sight of a Starfleet Marine shuttle wasn't an uncommon sight on Valeria. However if they were detected by sensors, somebody might have deduced that their transponder signal had them traveling into an entirely different direction.

The rain seemed to pick up the further south they were heading, pelting the shuttle's windscreen with increasing intensity. Michael could see that the rolling hills which had dominated the surroundings of the monastery quickly gave way to large areas of forested lands. Wasco did his best to avoid any population centers, of which there weren't many as the Valerians didn't tend to cluster around cities.

They didn't encounter any trouble until approaching the base nearly five hours after they had first set out.

"We're being hailed." Wasco looked at Owens.

"Let's hear it."

*"Shuttle Sierra-November-Two-Two-Six, this is FOC Phoenix Control. Please identify yourself and state the purpose of your approach."*

Owens nodded at Wasco, letting him know to respond.

"Phoenix control, this is Major Cesar Wasco on the Shuttle Sierra-November-Two-Two-Six. We are transporting two prisoners to Phoenix detention. An enemy Cardassian combatant and a Valerian national suspected of sabotage. Requesting permission to approach."

There was a momentary delay and Owens held his breath. If they didn't buy their little story there was little to stop them from shooting the shuttle out of the sky.

*"Sierra-November-Two-Two-Six, Phoenix Control. Scans confirms you are carrying a Cardassian and Valerian on your shuttle. You are cleared to land on platform Seven-Four-Oscar. Disengage all engines once on the ground and await your escort."*

"Solid copy on all, Phoenix Control. Sierra-November-Two-Two-Six, out."

Owens could see the base coming into view. The large compound was strategically positioned on a small rise in the jungle below. It was heavily defended, similarly to the fusion plant they had scouted earlier. It was larger however and with much more activity. Wasco didn't steer the shuttle directly towards the base but to a small landing area at the foot of

the hill, at least a few hundred meters from the base itself. No doubt intended as a security buffer.

Michael stood and headed towards the back to find Deen along with Belore and Sharval. "So far so good. Now we just have to convince them to let us in." He presented two small and thin silvery discs which he had retrieved from his tactical vest.

Sharval, now on her feet as well, smirked when she recognized the purpose of the small devices and held up her wrists in front of him. "Tell the truth, you've been wanting to tie me up from the moment you've met me."

He offered a little smile in response and then dropped the device in between her wrists. The silvery disc immediately hummed to the life, sensing the right composition of skin and bones and forced them together.

"A bit tight, no?"

He shrugged and handed the second disc to Deen who restrained Belore in a similar fashion.

A few short moments later Wasco had sat down the shuttle and joined the others in the back. He considered the captain. "I suggest you let me do the talking, sir."

"Those are your people, Major. If you can't get us passed them, nobody can." He grabbed an assault rifle and Deen and Wasco did the same. He gently poked Sharval in the back when she remained reluctant to head towards the exit.

"Hey, take it easy there, Sky Knight."

"You don't stop calling me that soon and we might find out what else I can do with this."

She shook her head in mock disgust. "You're enjoying this far too much."

Owens responded with a tiny smile. Sharval was obviously a woman of action, somebody who liked to take charge. Now she had been reduced to a role in which she could do nothing but follow and it obviously caused her some frustration. And he did take a little pleasure of seeing her out of her comfort zone for once. He quickly forced himself to present a more serious mien when the shuttle hatch began to open and a group of four heavily armed Marines came into view.

Thankfully none of them appeared particularly suspicious of their new guests. Their phaser rifles were hanging by their sides or slung over their backs as they waited patiently for Wasco and the others to disembark.

Owens found that Sharval's comment about Deen's age earlier didn't hold water. The lead Marine was noticeably younger than even the Tenarian. He offered a crisp salute to the major.

"At ease, Corporal. Just here to drop off a couple of prisoners we picked up a few clicks north of here. Looks like the locals are scheming with the Cardassians now."

The young corporal relaxed and shot Belore and Sharval poisonous glares. "Not surprised at all, sir. Damn Valerians can't be trusted. They think the Spoonheads will be their friends? They've got another thing coming. We can take them from here."

Owens and Deen exchanged a very brief look of concern.

"That's alright, Corporal, we might as well take them in ourselves and brief the colonel while we're here."

The young man considered the major for a moment and then let his eyes wander over the rest of his team and his prisoners.

"But I do have a timetable, Corporal. General Lam wants me back at HQ as soon as possible."

That forced the man's focus back towards Wasco. He offered a curt nod. "Of course, sir. We'll escort you."

He shook his head. "That won't be necessary, we'll find our way." Without waiting for a response from the corporal, Wasco set out towards the base, following clear signage pointing to the main gate on top of the hill.

Owens felt the corporal's eyes resting on their team for a while but risked a quick glance over his shoulder anyway and was relieved to find that he and his men had seemingly moved on to other duties.

"That was almost too easy."

He graced Sharval with a satisfied little smile. "Oh ye of little faith."

Her responding blank look gave proof that she didn't fully understand the reference.

"I suggest we don't count our chickens just yet."

The Valerian turned towards Deen next, clearly having a hard time following the idioms.

But Owens was more concerned with the reason for her concern. They had nearly reached the gate when he spotted another group of six Marines approaching with fast steps, heading them off. These ones looked much more determined, led by what appeared to be a more experienced NCO.

“Relax and keep moving unless they say otherwise.” Wasco followed his own advice.

They said otherwise. “Stop right there.”

Wasco halted just a few short meters from the main gate.

“Major Wasco?”

He turned to regard the new Marine unit and the Deltan sergeant who was leading them and who had called out to him. “Yes, Gunnery Sergeant. What is it? We are in a bit of hurry.”

“This can’t be good.” Belore kept his voice low as the Marines nearly completely surrounded him and the others.

The Deltan took a moment to look Wasco and the others over.

“As I said, we don’t have a lot of time, Sergeant. I would appreciate it if you’d let us pass.” Wasco’s voice was sharp, no doubt the same kind of tone he relied on when giving orders to his men when in combat. It had worked pretty well on the young corporal earlier but the Deltan didn’t seem willing to bow to his authority quite so quickly.

“You need to come with us, sir.”

Wasco shook his head. “What I need to do, Sergeant, is deliver these prisoners, brief the colonel and return to HQ as quickly as possible.”

The sergeant stepped closer and Owens suspected trouble immediately. It became even more obvious when the other Marines raised their rifles. They didn’t aim them but the implication was clear. “Major, I have orders from General Lam to bring you back to HQ immediately. Now I would much prefer to do this as respectfully to you as possible considering your rank. But if you force my hand, we can do this a lot less civilly.”

“Let me speak to the colonel first.”

The sergeant shook his head. “The general was very clear about this, sir. He wants you, Captain Owens and Gul Belore back at HQ without delay.”

And with that, all pretenses disappeared. Owens wasn’t entirely sure how Lam had found out about their attempt to get to Phoenix but the most likely scenario involved Thelos and the other Marines having managed to free themselves and contact Lam about Wasco’s defection which in turn had likely prompted an alarm going out to all bases in the area.

“You will lower your weapons and come with us now.”

With the niceties apparently out of the way, the Marines aimed their weapons at the no longer disguised Starfleet team and their prisoners.

"Told you this was too easy." Sharval raised her arms in frustration, causing a couple of rifles to draw beads on her.

"Listen to me, Marine. All I'm asking for is a word with Colonel van der Meer. Five minutes. After that we'll go wherever you want to take us."

"I can't do that, sir."

Owens understood what was at stake here. Considering the kind of orders Lam had given Sergeant Thalos, it stood to reason that this man had similar instructions concerning Belore's and his own fate. And even if he had not been told to terminate them, somebody else would have been ordered to do just that, most likely making it look like an accident.

Michael took a careful step forward until he stood side by side with Wasco, keeping his rifle down and making sure not to give the Marines any reason to fire. "This is one of those orders you do not want to follow, Sergeant. What you don't realize is that this war is over. Has been for days. We have been sent here under orders from Starfleet Command to end it. Orders your general is ignoring."

The sergeant considered Owens suspiciously. Clearly it wasn't enough to sway him. A few words from an officer he had never met before would not trump the oath he had sworn to follow the orders of his commanders.

"Jonar Arik?"

Apparently surprised at hearing his name, the Deltan looked towards the person who had uttered it. Owens stepped aside to allow Deen to step forward.

"DeMara Deen?" He seemed completely baffled at finding that woman here and Owens could tell that Deen seemed just as surprised.

The Deltan's face turned into a wide smile and at first Michael attributed this to the general reaction many people had when they met a Tenarian for the first time. But there was much more there than that. There was recognition in his eyes and he actually instructed his men to lower their rifles when they drew on her.

"I can't believe it's you. You are a Marine?"

He nodded with a widening grin. "Yeah. What the hells are you doing here?"

It took her moment to respond, getting over her own shock of this entirely unexpected encounter. "I serve on *Eagle* under Captain Owens." She indicated towards her commanding officer. "I cannot believe you became a Marine. You were studying sciences at the Academy."

That grin didn't leave his face. "Trust me, Dee, it's a long story."

It was then that Owens finally understood who this sergeant was. Jonar Arik had been a cadet at the Academy at the same time Deen had been there. In fact, at the same time he had been a tutor. He was fairly sure Arik had not attended any of his classes but he did remember that he had been a very close friend of Deen's who back then had refused to engage in any kind of intimate relationship until she had rather suddenly gotten involved with him. It had made her reconsider leaving Starfleet Academy after she had grown increasingly frustrated at the amount of attention she had invited there.

Sharval took a half step forward. "I am all in favor of beautiful reunions with long lost acquaintances but perhaps now that we have established that we're all friend here, perhaps we could meet with this colonel of yours."

Arik looked torn. "I have my orders."

Deen considered him with her powerful purple eyes. "Please, Jonar, let us talk to her. The captain is right, the war with the Dominion is over and we need to find a way to end it here on Valeria as well. The colonel may help."

He wasn't immediately convinced. Even Deen's near magical charm couldn't cut through years of training and dedication to following orders. But then he nodded slowly. "I'll let her know you're here and of your request. If she agrees I'll take you to see her."

"That's all we ask." Deen smiled at him.

Sergeant Arik stepped away from Owens and the others to make the call but the rest of his men remained in place, keeping watchful eyes on them.

"I think I'm about to change my mind about you." Sharval looked towards Deen. "You can be quite useful to have around."

"I'm not just a pretty face."

She shrugged. "I don't know if I'd go that far."

Deen scowled at her but before she could come back with a response, Arik returned.

"Follow me. I'll take you to Colonel van der Meer now."

*Eagle* had made good time by really pushing her powerful warp engines this time and had managed to arrive in the Mittias system only a few minutes after *Sacajawea* which had already entered orbit around the small moon of the third planet. The larger ship joined her with little delay.

Star felt anxious and not just because she had to deal with Mahoney again, something which had become an increasingly unpleasant experience. She fully expected another conflict and not necessarily with the enemy. Her entire body was tense as she sat up even straighter in the captain's chair. She had wanted the chance to prove herself handling things in Captain Owens' absence ever since she had arrived on *Eagle* and now that he was gone, all of a sudden she wished for nothing more than for him being in the center seat instead of her. "Stanmore, give me a picture here. What's on that moon?"

The operations officer checked his console. "The heavy electromagnetic radiation in this system is making sensor readings unreliable, sir."

The turbolift doors opened to allow Elijah Katanga and Nora Laas to enter the bridge. Star noticed that they had been in deep conversation which quickly concluded after they stepped out onto the bridge. She felt a small tinge of irrational jealousy, as if she didn't appreciate the idea that her closest and perhaps only friend on this ship was warming up to the one person who had once been her archrival. She quickly shook off those thoughts, she had much more important things to concern herself with.

She turned towards the rear of the bridge where Xylion had once again manned his science station. "Commander, anything you can do?"

The Vulcan was already at work. "I am compensating for the gamma ray interference by utilizing the lateral sensor array." This approach seemed to yield results after just a few seconds. "I am still not able to distinguish individual life sign readings, however sensors are detecting a cluster of bio signs on the surface as well as multiple structures and starship energy signatures."

"Can you determine the type of ships?"

Xylion turned from his station. "Not with complete accuracy. In my estimation there is a 77.82% chance that the vessels are escorts of Cardassian origin."

"Looks to me we're in the right place." Nora had taken position next to Trinik on the raised platform behind the command area. Of course nobody would have ever confused the Bajoran as a tactical officer, the security chief was much more of a hands-on kind of person and didn't usually spend a lot of time on the bridge. "And it seems like a pretty good hiding place for pirates."

Star had to agree and nodded.

A soft trill from the tactical station caught Trinik's attention. "Sir, we are being hailed by the *Sacajawea*."

She glanced towards the screen. "Took them long enough."

Katanga had taken his usual chair to her left. "Remember to be civil now."

"Who me? When am I ever not?" She stood and took a few steps towards the screen, bracing herself to face her worst nightmare yet again. "Put him through please."

Mahoney, as usual, didn't look happy at all. "*Commander, I take it you have been able to scan the moon's surface with your advanced sensors?*"

Star was fairly sure he was being sarcastic even if it wasn't called for. She nodded. "Looks as if you found their base."

That self-satisfying smile returned to his features. "*We've tried to hail them a few times but they are unwilling to respond. I've already advised the Thulians that we have located the source of all their troubles and that we will be dealing with it swiftly.*"

She frowned at that. She didn't like when people were getting ahead of themselves.

"*I want you to commence an orbital bombardment. Target their ships on the surface and wipe them out. That will pretty much put an end to their abilities to carry out any further raids on freighters in this sector.*"

And strand perhaps hundreds of people on a remote little moon in the middle of nowhere, thought Star. Not to mention kill whoever would be unlucky enough to still be in those ships. But what bothered her even more at that moment was the fact that he had apparently decided to let her do all the dirty work and she wondered why. Was it so he could keep his hands clean if things went sideways? Did he plan to add her actions of destroying a pirate base from orbit to the long list of things he would be

using to try and get her cashiered out of the service? She wouldn't have put it passed him.

Katanga got out of his chair, clearly not comfortable at all with this order. "I think we should try to talk to them first. Give them every opportunity to surrender."

Mahoney shook his head. *"We've already tried that. And not just today. They have continuously spurned all our efforts to open a dialogue. Even the man you took into custody has decided to be uncooperative. Now it's time for resolute action. Which is entirely appropriate considering they were directly responsible for annihilating an entire colony."*

Star took another step closer to the screen to underscore her next point. "I'm not so sure about that. We've made a number of observations which don't quite match up with the image of ruthless pirates. There were multiple fake warp signatures around Yarra III even though we've been able to establish only one vessel was responsible for the attack. And we are not able to verify that that vessel was the same used by these so-called pirates. What's more, throughout the attack—which lasted minutes—the outpost didn't once return fire."

*"So they were caught unaware."*

"There are too many unanswered questions. Such as why the Thulian freighters are going out of their way to pass through the Valerian system even if it is nowhere near their normal flight route and the detour is costing them days. Something isn't right here and I believe whoever is on that base might provide us some answers. Lets try and find a way to talk to them before we decide to turn the surface of that moon into glass. We could send an away team down there."

*"And risk turning them into hostages?"* He resolutely shook his head. *"I don't think so. I need you to carry out your orders, Commander. The longer we delay the greater the chance they may manage an escape."*

She uttered a heavy sigh. "Damn it, Evan, listen to me. I know we've had our disagreements but—

*"No, you listen to me, Commander."* The man practically exploded like an erupting volcano, gripping the armrests of his chair tightly as if he was trying to keep himself from jumping out of it. *"You start following my orders, do you understand? Every single one I give you. That is your duty in case you had forgotten. And you will start showing me the respect I deserve. Not once over the last couple of days have you referred to me as sir or captain, that stops now, am I making myself clear? You don't even realize the trouble you're already in. After*

*you have repeatedly ignored and disobeyed my direct orders, you should consider yourself lucky I haven't had you removed from command yet. My patience with you – which has been significant – has come to its end. You will start following my orders to the letter or so help me God, you'll spend the rest of your Starfleet career behind bars. Now, fire on that goddamned moon.*" Mahoney stabbed a control on his armrest and his image disappeared from the viewscreen.

Dead silence fell over the bridge, almost as if nobody was willing to do as much as utter an errant breath after Mahoney's seething tirade. Even Star had been shocked into wordlessness, not having expected him to lose his temper in such a public manner. Perhaps she shouldn't have been surprised but so far he had managed to hide his simmering hate for her behind a mask of civility, only letting it shine through when they had been alone.

The problem of course was the fact that he was right. She had not shown him the kind of respect that would have been expected from her and she had in fact disregarded his orders, was considering doing so even now. As far as Starfleet Command was concerned, Mahoney would have been entirely within his rights to relieve her of command and after that it'd be just a formality until she would face another court martial. He had her exactly where he had wanted her.

Star felt the eyes of the entire bridge crew on her, watching her carefully to see what her next order would be.

It was the security chief who spoke up first. "I don't give a *frak* what this guy's problem is. You are right, there is something else going on here and we need to find out what it is."

She couldn't hide her amazement at hearing supportive words from the very same woman who just a few months ago wouldn't have hesitated for a second to speak out against her.

Xylion had stood from his station. "Agreed. The evidence, while circumstantial at this time, warrants further investigation. Additionally, any instruction to carry out an unprovoked orbital bombardment of the moon's surface which could lead to a high number of casualties is not only ill-advised, it might constitute an illegal order under Starfleet regulations."

"And in my professional medical opinion," Katanga said, taking a reaffirming step into her direction. "Captain Mahoney is displaying obvious signs of higher than normal stress levels which may cloud his judgment in this matter. Personally I believe he's completely lost his

marbles, but that won't make it into my report. At least not quite in those exact words."

Tazla Star smirked. Not just at Katanga's colorful manner in which he had framed the issue but also at the unexpected support from her officers. It reminded her of something Nora Laas had told her a few days earlier. *On this ship, we look out for each other.* And she was unquestionably part of this ship now as well. It was the kind of loyalty no amount of latinum in the galaxy could buy.

She offered them a thankful nod before she glanced at her science officer. "Would we be able to beam down an away team through the interference, Commander?"

"We should be able to compensate for the radiation by boosting the annular confinement beam. However I would strongly suggest any away team would equip itself with transporter enhancers and communication boosters."

Star looked at Nora next.

The security chief placed her hands on the edge of the horseshoe-shaped tactical console and leaned forward. "I can have a team ready in less than five minutes."

"Take the Marines. We don't know what to expect down there."

She was already heading towards the turbolift. "My thinking precisely, Commander."

"Lieutenant?"

The Bajoran stopped short of reaching the exit and turned back to face Star.

"We need to find out what's going on here. This is a fact finding mission, not an assault."

Nora uttered a little sigh. "Why do people always think all I am capable of is fighting and shooting? Don't worry, Commander, I will be extremely diplomatic." And then she disappeared into the turbolift.

Star couldn't help but have doubts about how diplomatic the fiery Bajoran could be, especially when backed by an entire team of Marines. For a moment she considered sending Xylion with her to lead the away mission in her stead but she quickly dismissed the idea as she needed her science officer on the bridge in case there were unforeseen problems with the electromagnetic interference in this system. Besides, she reasoned, Nora had shown real trust in her. It was only fair to return the favor.

She took the center chair again and after a moment Katanga followed suit, sitting down next to her and aiming an encouraging glance her way. Then she focused once more on the *Sacajawea* on the screen. She had decided on her next move, the question now was what would Mahoney's be? How far would he go to get his revenge on her for once and for all? She had the bad feeling that she would come to regret finding out.

Sergeant Arik and a couple of his men escorted Wasco, Owens, Deen and the two pretend prisoners into a large briefing room of sorts. An utilitarian table stood at its center and at least six similar chairs surrounded it. Most of the wall screens displayed tactical maps of the area with Starfleet and Cardassian troop locations and other relevant information.

By the table, leaning against the edge, Owens spotted what had to be van der Meer. Even not standing at her full height, she appeared tall and statuesque with blonde hair pulled tightly into a short ponytail, it's bright color almost rivaling DeMara's. As her name had implied she appeared to be of Scandinavian descent and her formfitting fatigues bespoke of a strong and powerful body. Owens guessed her to be in her mid-thirties, similar to Wasco himself. She had a stern look on her face which quickly vanished when she recognized an old friend.

She stood away from the table. "Tony?"

Owens knew she was referring to Wasco by his middle name which was Anthony.

"What in the name of God brings you to this forsaken place?" She quickly approached her fellow Marine and they hugged for a moment.

Michael was relieved to find her this pleased to see him again. If her reaction had been different, their chances of making her an ally against Lam would have been drastically reduced.

"Svea, it's great seeing you again. He made you a lieutenant colonel, huh? Always knew you'd have your own battalion one day."

They separated and considered each other for a moment.

"The reward for loyalty. Wish it had been under different circumstances. My predecessor was killed in combat a few months ago."

Arik stepped forward to address the colonel. "Ma'am, we have orders to take the Major and the rest of his group back to HQ immediately, however he was insistent on seeing you first."

"Orders from whom?"

"General Lam, ma'am."

She frowned and looked at Wasco and his companions before focusing back on the sergeant. "And how come this is the first I hear about this?"

The Deltan looked uncomfortable. "Honestly, ma'am, I don't know."

But Wasco had an answer. "Because Lam knows that we came here to see you. He knows that we are old friends and he wanted to make sure we didn't get a chance to talk."

Van der Meer looked concerned. "What the hell is going on here, Tony?"

"More than you think. This is Captain Owens from the starship *Eagle*, as well as Lieutenant Deen. Sub-commissioner Sharval from Valerian Security and Gul Belore, representative from the Cardassian government."

They all exchanged quick nods.

"I think it be best if I let Captain Owens explain the situation."

Michael stepped forward. "Colonel, *Eagle* has been dispatched to Valeria as Starfleet Command has been unable to establish communications with General Lam. We have been sent to advise that the Dominion War is over and a peace treaty is now in effect. We are here to prepare your troops to come home."

It took van der Meer a moment for those words to sink in. "I think we'd better sit down."

Arik made no move towards any of the chairs. "Ma'am, what about my orders?"

"Under the circumstances I would recommend that you advise Lam that we are in custody and on our way back to the capital."

Van der Meer looked doubtful at Wasco's suggestion, clearly not liking the idea of lying to a commanding officer.

"I'll explain later but trust me, right now that's the better option than possibly having Lam show up on your doorstep with an entire battalion of his own."

The colonel's eyes grew a little wider then, but clearly still reluctant. She looked at Arik. "Alright, do it. Advise HQ Wasco and the others are in custody and awaiting transfer." She glanced back at her friend. "You better have one hell of a story to tell me or those orders won't be too far from the truth."

The Deltan appeared as unhappy to carry out those orders as van der Meer had been giving them but he acknowledged them with a curt nod regardless and then left with his two men.

The colonel took a seat at the table and the others quickly followed suit. Owens had made sure to remove Sharval's and Belore's restraints first.

Van der Meer looked at the faces of her unexpected guests. "Now, somebody mind telling me what kind of trouble you have brought my way?"

Deen removed her helmet to let her hair out and placed it on the table. "It's peace, Colonel. You would think it's the exact opposite of trouble."

The Marine couldn't help but regard the beautiful young woman for a moment, perhaps distracted by her undeniable aura for just a brief moment. "Alright. And that's very good news but why come to me with this and why is Lam meaning to arrest you?" She glanced back at Owens.

"A very good question, Colonel." The captain had now also removed his helmet. "General Lam is not convinced that this peace is a good idea for Valeria."

Sharval uttered a displeased grunt. "Because a foreigner clearly knows much better what's good for us than we do ourselves."

Van der Meer aimed her a confused glance before looking back at Owens. "I don't exactly follow, Captain."

"The general believes that regardless of the defeat of the Dominion and the peace treaty now in effect, that the Cardassians still pose a significant threat to Valerian and Federation interests on this planet. He has refused to consider a ceasefire which Metral has in principle agreed on, convinced that any such move would be exploited by the Cardassians to take over Valeria. When we attempted to show to the general that the Valerians were willing to accept these kind of risks if it meant an end to hostilities, his response was to have the Valerian delegation as well as Gul Belore, myself and Lieutenant Deen arrested. Lam will not stop until he has won this war, peace treaty or not."

The colonel leaned back in her chair, taking in all this information as her eyes wandered across the room. They finally came to rest on the only Cardassian present. "If the Dominion has surrendered why isn't Metral doing the same?"

"Metral is in a similar position as your general, Colonel." Belore leaned forward slightly. "He has lost contact with Central Command and his last orders were to keep fighting until victory was secured. He is understandably suspicious of these news but when I spoke to him he was at least willing to agree to a truth if Lam agreed to do the same."

Owens took over. "And we cannot wait for this to sort itself out. Lam has a new fusion plant going operational any day now and plans a major

offensive against the Cardassians. Hundreds, if not thousands will be killed in a name of war which is already won. I cannot allow this. It may take days, perhaps even weeks until Starfleet can reestablish communication or sent additional ships to transport the troops home."

The colonel uttered a heavy sigh. "And for some reason you thought bringing all this to me would help you?"

"I knew you'd listen to us, Svea, it's more than Lam or any other Marine on this world is willing to do. We need to find a way to stop this before it's too late."

She shook her head. "I'm a Marine, Tony, and you better than anyone knows what that means. I fight and I follow orders. I'm not a diplomat and I'm sure as hell not a peace envoy."

Owens voice took on a sharp edge. "No, Colonel. We are the peace envoy and we've told you how successful that has been. As for following orders, Lam is ignoring his, which means any orders he is giving are illegal and therefore null and void."

"You speak of orders, Captain, but where are they? It's not that I don't believe you but others will not be so quick to trust the words of a starship captain over those of the general they have followed for years."

"They are on my ship."

"And where is your ship?"

He uttered a little sigh. "Not here currently, I'm afraid. They are dealing with an emergency elsewhere."

"I think I may be able to help with orders."

All eyes turned to DeMara Deen who had promptly removed the tactical vest she still wore. Then she hesitated. "If you gentlemen would be so kind as to divert your glances for a moment."

Owens wasn't sure what she was up to but seeing her insistent eyes he did as she had asked, Wasco and Belore doing the same. He could hear the telltale sound of clothes being undone and then heard Shaval utter a little amused laugh.

"Here we go."

When he turned back to her she held a small green isolinear chip in her hand while she was securing her fatigues again with the other. She answered Owens' puzzled glance with a playful smirk. "I hid this and kept it with me when Lam had us thrown into that dungeon of his, thought it might come in handy."

He understood. Those were the files he had requested from *Eagle* before she had departed. He didn't ask where on her body she had concealed them but he had a pretty good idea.

Belore considered the woman with approval. "Quite ingenious, Lieutenant."

Even Sharval couldn't drop that smirk. "Full of surprises, aren't you?"

Deen shrugged and then slid the chip across the table where van der Meer easily caught it. "On this you'll find all relevant surrender documents, the full text of the Treaty of Bajor as well as our authenticated orders to ensure the end of the ground war on Valeria. Even a declaration signed by all the chief magistrates of Valeria asking for the end of the war and the withdrawal of all foreign troops."

She picked up the small thin plastic strip. "It's a good start but I'm not sure if it's enough."

Sharval uttered a heavy groan. "Of course it's not."

Michael shot her a displeased look, not appreciating her defeatist attitude.

"Oh come on, it's obvious what's going on here." She leaned back and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "She said it herself, she's a Marine, just like all the others. Were you really expecting her or anyone else to turn against Lam? These people are practically worshipping that mad man."

Both Wasco and van der Meer skewered the Valerian with poisonous glares of their own. The colonel spoke before the major had the chance. "It isn't that easy. And no, I do not worship General Lam even though I have to admit that I find it difficult to accept that he would so easily disregard these news that you have brought." She looked back at Owens. "But you have to understand that Marines operate on a rigid system of loyalty to our commanders. It's the only way we can be such an effective fighting force. I know that other branches in Starfleet do not fully understand this concept but trust me, without it, we wouldn't stand a chance against the likes of the Jem'Hadar or even the Cardassians who are born and bred or taught from a very young age to give their lives for their cause."

Belore nodded along slowly, acceding to that particular point.

"The general must have his reasons for wanting to continue this fight and I just don't see a way of how I or anyone else short of his superior officers can make him change his mind about this."

“And are you willing to doom hundreds or even thousands of your own men in this pursuit?” Owens kept his tone sharp as a dagger.

She raised her hand over her eyes for a moment, massaging her forehead in the process. “I joined the Marines precisely to not having to make those kind of decisions, damn it. We follow orders and defend the Federation. That’s what we do.”

“Then defend the Federation, Colonel. Stop Lam.”

“And how do you suppose I do that?” Her voice was now just as intense as his while her eyes drilled themselves into Owens’. “You want me to take my battalion and march on the embassy in the capital? Lam controls ten times as many men as I do. Besides, my own men would never follow an order to turn against their own general.”

Owens shook his head. “We don’t need to march on the capital. What we need is to stop Lam from being able to continue this war. Take away his ability to wage this offensive he has planned and destroy his power plant before it can go operational. With your battalion we have more than enough firepower to achieve this.”

He could tell that van der Meer remained unconvinced and even Wasco didn’t seem fully committed to this plan. The colonel stood from her chair and walked over to one of the many screens on the wall. Owens could see that she was looking for the location of that facility on one of her maps. It didn’t take her too long to find it. Then she turned around, appearing even more skeptical than before. “A heavily defended plant. How many Marines do you think would lose their lives on such an assault?”

He recognized it for the rhetorical question that it was. There was no doubt that any direct attack would incur casualties but he could think of no better option. “A lot fewer than a full out offensive will cost.”

“But that’s different, Captain, surely you can see that. Any offensive is aimed at our enemies, this is an attack on our own people.”

Belore stood. “We are not your enemies anymore.”

“And you are bound to kill a great number of my people in this offensive as well.” Sharval didn’t stand but her voice was just as fierce as those of the others. Perhaps even more so. “Are you willing to have that on your conscience, Colonel? Being responsible for all these deaths which could have been avoided if only you’d shown some backbone?”

But van der Meer simply shook her head, not rising to Sharval’s bait. “Even if I were to agree to this plan of yours, my own commanders

wouldn't go through with it, I can guarantee you that. As I've told you, I've only been in command for a few months. Not long enough to earn the unquestioned trust of this battalion. If I ordered them to attack a Marine facility, peace treaty or no, I'd be removed from command by my own staff in a heartbeat and the next battalion commander won't hesitate to have you delivered back to Lam."

Sharval shot her a humorless smile. "And here I thought your ethos was loyalty over everything."

"Loyalty means more than just following orders. It's not just some sort of abstract concept which means to stand by your commanders no matter what. It's loyalty to your own people, to the men and women we fight side by side with. There has never been a mutiny amongst Marines precisely for this reason. We don't turn against our own. Ever."

Wasco nodded. "She's right."

Deen seemed surprised to hear him say this. "Coming from you? You've turned against your own, Major."

"And it was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do." He pointed at the map. "And doing it on this scale is unthinkable. Certainly to the Marines we would have to ask to fight this battle."

Owens suppressed a sigh he felt coming on. He understood what he was up against. Centuries of training and programming to follow orders and being true to one's nature could not be cast aside this quickly. And even van der Meer, who appeared willing to accept what he had told her, seemed to be in an untenable position. She was clearly not established enough within her own unit to be able to give the kind of orders that had to be given if they wanted to stop what was to come next.

"What is unthinkable to me is the idea that any more people will die on this world because of this war. So maybe we cannot get Marines to turn against Marines but what if we could reach out to the other commanders? We don't have to get them to fight Lam, all we need them to do is to refuse to fight at all. Not because you or I are telling them to but because these are the orders coming from Starfleet Command. Orders which override General Lam's." He looked straight at van der Meer. "And Marines are supposed to follow orders, correct?"

She nodded but only hesitantly. "We can try. I can make some careful inquiries and this might help." She held up the chip. "But doing so without Lam finding out is going to be very difficult. I have to be perfectly honest with you, Captain. After following Lam for two years, fighting perhaps the

most intense war any of us have ever seen in our lifetimes, I cannot imagine a single commander on this planet not to follow him to the gates of hell if that's what he would ask of them."

The tension on *Sacajawea* was so thick, Leva felt as if he could have measured it with a tricorder. Everyone had witnessed Mahoney's outburst at Tazla Star and for a brief moment he had revealed exactly how he felt about that woman which had once been his captain for a short time. There was seething, unadulterated hatred there.

He was out of his chair and pacing the compact bridge now, throwing furtive glances at the screen where he could spot *Eagle* in a parallel orbit around the moon containing the pirate base. "What's she doing?"

Alendra shook her head. "Nothing, sir. She's just sitting there."

He glanced at Ensign Mirko Nikolić who Leva had placed at the tactical station to give the young man some hands-on experience. "Hail them again."

The Serbian officer shook his head. "They are ignoring us, sir."

"Damn that woman, damn her to hell. She's through. By the time I'm done with her she's going to be through in Starfleet." He finally stopped pacing and glanced back at the screen. "Fine, if she wants to continue to disobey direct orders, that's her decision. She'll pay the price for this soon enough." Mahoney had calmed himself somewhat before he turned to consider the tactical officer again. "Looks like we'll have to do what needs to be done. Ensign, target those ships on the surface and fire. We need to take them out before they can scramble."

Leva took a few steps towards his captain. "Sir, the electromagnetic interference in this system is bound to throw off our targeting scanners." He kept his voice as low as possible. "If we open fire we may cause a great deal of collateral damage."

Mahoney shook his head. "I've given these people all the chances in the world, Commander. They had plenty of opportunities to surrender. But this ends now, one way or another."

Leva held his ground, looking the man in the eye for a moment longer and easily spotting his resolve in this matter. Then he nodded curtly and stepped up next to Nikolić, relieving the younger man to take control of the ship's weapons himself. Under the circumstances not only did he feel

he was better suited for the task, he didn't want the ensign to have to start his tactical career by accidentally incinerating an occupied building.

"Fire photon torpedoes."

It took Leva a couple of seconds longer than usual to ensure he was targeting the energy signatures of those ships and nothing else. But even when he had confirmation and he had double-checked the results the sensors were providing him, he hesitated.

Mahoney was not pleased with the delay. "Commander, open fire."

Leva tapped the commit control and the ship unleashed a single torpedo towards the surface. Concerned about possible errant shots, he intentionally kept the fire rate as low as possible, even if that meant that they would have to fire a number of additional torpedoes until all targets had been destroyed.

It took the projectile only a few seconds to traverse the moon's atmosphere and smash into the surface of the small moon. The sensor feedback was encouraging. "One ship destroyed, two more heavily damaged. Eight ships remaining."

Mahoney nodded with a satisfied little smile. "Excellent, keep firing until every single one of their ships is destroyed or beyond repair."

Leva promptly fired another torpedo. Then he noticed an incoming message.

But with him being busy firing the weapons, Alendra handled communications from ops. "Sir, *Eagle* is advising us that they have sent an away team to the surface and asking us to hold our fire."

The captain stepped up next to the Bolian to look over her shoulder almost as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Goddamnit it, I told her not to do that. Tell her to bring them back right now."

Alendra went to work but quickly shook her head before looking up at the captain. *Eagle* was not complying.

Mahoney was fuming. Then he turned towards Leva again. "Keep firing, Commander. That'll make them think twice about being down there when I told them not to be."

Leva hesitated again. It was one thing to carry out an orbital bombardment of a pirate installation, it was something else entirely to do so when knowing that your own people could end up in the crossfire. "Sir, I don't think that's a good idea."

"I don't care what you think. Keep firing."

He went back to his sensors which now confirmed the presence of

Starfleet signatures on the surface. They were not close to his targets but with the sensors remaining unreliable, it wouldn't have taken much for a torpedo to lose its guidance track and impact close to their location. And he was well aware of *Eagle's* usual procedure when sending away teams to possibly hostile areas. Nora Laas was going to be down there. The thought that he could be responsible for her death by opening fire again made him unable to see this through. He stood from his station.

Mahoney hissed angrily before he pointed at the ensign. "You, take over and fire."

Nikolić nodded slowly and then glanced at Leva who was doing his best to discourage the young man from taking that seat.

"Now, Ensign."

The additional prompt made him jump in front of the tactical station.

"Sir, *Eagle* is moving between us and the surface." Alendra's fingers were racing over her console, trying to confirm her own report. Then she nodded. "They are attempting to block us."

Leva looked at the screen and noticed with some relieve that his former ship was indeed putting herself directly into their line of fire, her large, oval-shaped saucer almost entirely obstructing their view of the moon.

Mahoney raced towards the helm. "T'Sara, move us around her."

But the Vulcan woman did not appear to have any success. "They are matching our maneuvers, sir, I am unable to establish a clean line of fire."

"Keep at it." Mahoney whirled back towards tactical. "Ensign, keep firing, they'll move eventually."

"Uh, sir, I'm not sure if—"

"Do it, Ensign, that's a direct order."

Nikolić swallowed noticeably and turned back to the firing controls, obviously not having expected to having to fire on a friendly vessel on his first day at the tactical station.

Leva had heard enough. "Belay that order, Ensign." He stepped up to the captain.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Commander?"

"Trying to stop you from making a mistake, sir."

He shook his head. "They'll move."

"And what if they don't?" His voice was sharp and challenging. He had wanted to sound accommodating, perhaps even diplomatic but it seemed they were long passed that now. Somebody, he decided, needed to

step up to this man and as the first officer, that was precisely his job. "They didn't bring their away team back when you thought they would. What makes you think they'll move out of the way now?" He shook his head. "You cannot give an order to fire on our own people."

The man shot him a venomous glare before pointing at the screen. "Those are the people defying my orders. And there is a price to pay for that."

"Yes, perhaps. But not this one."

Mahoney whipped back around, his face twitching with anger. "Stand down, Commander, or leave the bridge if you are unable to follow orders!"

He didn't move an inch. His voice rising to match Mahoney's infuriated tone. "I'm not going to let you do this!"

"I swear to God, Commander, I'll have you thrown in the brig for insubordination. You'll share a cell with Tazla Star!"

"Stand down, Captain or I'll be forced to—"

"Forced to do what? You'll relieve me of command? Who the hell do you think you are? You've been on this ship for all but two minutes. You don't have—"

"I have all the authority I need, Captain." Leva didn't care they were shouting openly now, yelling over each other, while the rest of the bridge crew watched with disbelief at the power struggle taking place right within their midst.

"You goddamned Romulan traitor! I gave you every chance—"

"Like you're giving those pirates? Like you're giving our own people on that ship? Face it, Captain, you've lost your objectivity the moment you encountered Tazla Star. Whatever happened between the two of you is clouding your judgment."

"That is none of your goddamned business, do you understand? Now get off my bridge or I have security drag you out of here."

Mahoney was already well in Leva's personal space, so close in fact, he could smell the man's breath. But when he made an aggressive move towards him, as if to shove him aside, Leva pretty much reacted on instinct, grabbing Mahoney's arm and with his superior strength, easily flipped him over, causing him to land on the carpeted floor with a loud thud.

Mahoney moaned in pain and then fixed his infuriated eyes on his first officer. "Take him down!"

Leva spotted movement from the corner of his eye. Too late did he realize that Ensign T'Sara had stood from her station with a phaser in hand. One she was pointing right at him.

But just before she could fire, Alendra threw herself at the Vulcan. The phaser still erupted with bright crimson light but the beam went wide, missing Leva by a few inches and blasting into the master control console at the far end of the bridge, destroying *Sacajawea's* ship diagram displayed there by shattering the console into pieces.

Leva understood that this was getting out of control fast but it was too late now to put the metaphorical genie back into the bottle. Sides had been chosen and he was committed. One glance at Mahoney still splayed out on the floor confirmed it. He had murder in his eyes now and he would not stop until Leva was either dead or inside a brig. And after that, who knew what else he was capable of.

With no further delay, Leva leaped over the railing separating the central command core from the bridge stations to get back to the tactical console.

Nikolić, clearly confused as what he was supposed to be doing in this situation, attempted to restrain the half-Romulan as he approached. But he was too slow and inexperienced and Leva easily sidestepped the younger man, grabbed hold of his neck and back and shoved him towards the floor to get him out of his way.

He reached the tactical station and his fingers raced over the controls.

Another phaser beam impacted so close to his face, he could feel the heat of the beam against his tapered ear. He ducked instinctively but could not avoid being showered by hot sparks as the blast blew into the console to his right.

He turned to see that T'Sara had managed to throw off the Bolian and was getting ready to fire yet again. Out of time, Leva hit one last control and watched as the tactical station went completely dark. Mission accomplished he dove for cover and just in time to avoid a third phaser blast meant for him.

Leva could spot that Alendra had made it towards one of the turbolifts and he promptly followed, keeping low to avoid being skewered by one of those blasts.

"Shoot him!" But Mahoney was too impatient with his Vulcan helmsman and instead stepped up to her and ripped the weapon out of her hand.

It was the distraction Leva needed to make a run for the turbolift which Alendra had already boarded.

Had Mahoney left T'Sara to keep firing she may have had a clear shot at him but by the time he had grabbed the weapon off her, taken aim and pushed the triggering stub, Leva had already taken cover inside the lift car and Mahoney hit nothing but the empty bulkhead inside.

Leva ordered the lift to move and he could hear the captain cursing loudly as the doors closed. A final phaser blast hitting the closed doors rattled the cabin slightly but by then they were already speeding away from the bridge.

He pulled himself up and turned to find Alendra sitting on the floor with her head low and her back against the bulkhead. She had her arms wrapped around her knees, pressing them against her chest. "Thanks for your help up there, Marjorie. I managed to disable the tactical and security systems and it will take them some time to get them up and running again."

She didn't make eye contact. Instead she simply raised her blue index finger into the air and in his general direction. "Just ... just don't talk to me."

He nodded, understandingly. She had not expected to take his side. After all she had made that fairly clear in their last conversation. He wasn't entirely sure why she had changed her mind but he knew that even if she regretted her actions now, she was as committed as he was. There was no turning back now.

Leva leaned against the opposite bulkhead to catch his breath as he listened to the sound of the turbolift passing deck after deck. The truth was he had not planned for any of this. He had suspected that a conflict with Mahoney might become unavoidable but he had foolishly hoped that it would not escalate in such a drastic manner.

But now, after he had disabled Mahoney's ability to continue to pose a threat to *Eagle*, he had no idea what his next step should be. He had never mutinied before and the unfortunate truth remained; he was making things up as he went along.

Captain Owens had been understandingly frustrated after their meeting with Colonel van der Meer which had not been nearly as fruitful as he had hoped it would be. Deen sympathized with her position at least to some degree. If somebody had approached her on *Eagle*, attempting to convince her to plot against her captain, she would have been very skeptical and reluctant as well. Even if he had clearly appeared to be in the wrong.

Loyalty was a tricky thing and she had been fortunate enough never to have been placed in a position of having to choose between allegiance to her friends and commanding officers and having to do the right thing. Both Wasco and van der Meer were in an impossible situation in which they had been asked to turn against a man who wasn't just a commanding officer, but had also been a mentor and a role model to them. Sharval had called it worship, and perhaps this wasn't all too far off the mark, especially when the two officers had been younger and more impressionable. Neither of them were puppets, of that she was convinced, but they were also not the kind of people who had ever considered turning against their superiors.

Deen could only hope that they'd do the right thing in the end. Not just for their sake but also for the sake of the people under their command, the Valerians and even the Cardassians.

While Owens, Sharval, Belore and Wasco had stayed with the colonel to find a way to stop Lam and end this war, Deen had decided to go looking for somebody she had never expected to find on this planet, not to mention as part of the Marine contingent stationed here.

Van der Meer had granted her and Owens free access throughout the base but had insisted that they changed back into their Starfleet uniforms, appreciatively not fond of the idea of them walking around in fatigues they had appropriated from captured Marines. Thankfully they had both had the presence of mind not to leave their uniforms back at the monastery.

Deen quickly found that she stood out like a sore thumb and not just because of her clothing. Of course this wasn't anything new to her and she offered a friendly smile to everyone she encountered even the Marines who openly stared at her, momentarily entranced by her unfamiliar and inexplicable aura.

When she asked for directions, they pointed her to one of the barracks and once inside she found the section which housed the senior noncommissioned officers. There were fewer stares here, instead most Marines she came across snapped to attention when they spotted her and she wasn't entirely sure at first why that was.

"Officer on deck." A voice barked as she stepped into what looked like a lounge of sorts with chairs, tables and even a small bar at the corner. The dozen Marines or so quickly turned her way – those sitting, left their chairs – and stood at full attention.

Deen couldn't help but blush slightly at that reaction, not one she was used to at all. Even Wasco's Marines on *Eagle* weren't this regimented when she happened to come across one of them on the ship. "Uh ... sorry, I didn't mean to disturb. I'm just looking for a friend."

"Don't apologize. Marines don't like that."

She turned and spotted Jonar Arik just behind her, stepping up to her slowly. "What do I do?"

He rolled his eyes at her. "Just tell them to be as they were." He spoke very softly to make sure his fellow Marines wouldn't overhear him.

"Right." She nodded and then turned back to the waiting men in the room. She cleared her throat to make sure her voice would carry. "As you were."

And with that every single Marine went back to what they were doing before she had stepped into the lounge. A few of them aimed her curious glances but most of them did everything they could to ignore her presence.

She turned back to Arik with a sheepish smile but he shook his head before she could speak. "Not here. Come with me."

Deen followed him out of the lounge and into a wing of the building which contained living quarters. He stepped into the one which was presumably his but found a fellow Marine sitting at the only desk. The small room contained little else besides it, a chair, a double bunk bed and two storage closets made up the full inventory. "Ric, you mind giving me a minute here?"

The white bearded Efrosian man turned with a look of annoyance on his face. Once he spotted Deen, he quickly jumped out of his chair, going rigid as a board. "Ma'am."

She nodded. "As you were."

He relaxed.

"A minute?"

A large smile came over the man's face as he looked back and forth between Jonar Arik and Deen. "I think I'm going to give you more than that." He squeezed the Deltan's shoulder as he stepped up to him and then leaned into him to speak right into his ear. "I always knew that celibacy thing was just talk. And boy, do you know how to pick'em."

Arik glared. "It's not like that. She's an old friend."

"Whatever you say." He padded Arik's shoulder and then headed for the exit, shooting Deen a big, parting smile. "Ma'am."

She responded in kind and watched him go. "What does he think is going to happen here?"

Arik shook his head and walked to the door to make sure he had gone, then he pressed a control which caused it to slid shut before he turned back to look at his guest. "Ignore him. He's an idiot."

DeMara looked around the room.

"I'd give you the tour but this is really all there is."

She stepped up to the desk and turned back to face him, leaning against it. "I still can't get over the fact that you joined the Marines. You were such a gentle soul back at the Academy. You were majoring in biology." She recalled that he had suffered from persistent stutter initially. He had credited her in helping him overcome it during the year they had been together. She wasn't so sure however if it had really all been her doing.

He smirked at that. "Last person in the galaxy you'd expect to be a Marine, right?"

"Pretty much."

His face noticeably darkened. "You can thank the Borg for that."

She didn't immediately see the connection.

"My family lived on New Providence."

Deen's eyes grew wider. She had heard of the fateful Federation colony on Jouret IV. The entire colony had been wiped out by the Borg nearly ten years earlier during their incursion into Federation space. Most people tended to associate that Borg attack with the Battle of Wolf 359 in which thousands had lost their lives when Starfleet had been unable to stop the cube's advance towards Earth. She knew that many more people had died or had been lost to the Borg on New Providence. She quickly stepped closer to him, placing a hand on his upper arm. "I'm so sorry, I didn't know. I should have stayed in touch. I should have tried to reach you."

He shook his head and freed himself from the contact, stepping away and keeping his back to her. "No, it wasn't your fault. I was in a dark place for a long time, unwilling to speak to anyone about what had happened." He turned to regard her again but keeping his distance. "I was serving on the *Columbus* at the time and we were on a long range exploratory mission in the Beta Quadrant when it happen so I didn't learn about it for a few months. The counselors did their best but, I don't know, I guess I really didn't process any of it very well."

She shook her head but respected his space. "Nobody would have."

"I wasn't in a good place, Dee. I got angry and irritated all the time and it really affected my duties. I stayed on *Columbus* another year but eventually they wanted to ship me off to some sort of sanitarium. I couldn't do it and decided to quit instead. I wandered around pretty aimlessly for a while until I stumbled over a Marine recruiter looking for ex-Starfleeters. That's how I ended up here."

She desperately wanted to move closer and hug him but she could sense his reluctance.

He offered a little smile. "It's the best thing that ever happened to me, Dee. I still think about my family from time to time but for the most part I've gotten over losing them and I made a new life for myself here. I can't say that it's all been great, especially over the last two years. I've seen far too many friends and fellow Marines die."

"I've lost friends, too. I know it hurts."

He nodded slightly at their shared pain even if Deen couldn't shake the feeling that it had probably been worse for him. Not because he was Deltan or because he had lost his entire family to the Borg but because the bonds he had forged with the men and women he had fought with side by side had likely been stronger than most.

He forced himself to smile. "Hey, are you still in touch with Anara?"

She felt a smile of her own coming on when she thought of their common friend from their Academy days. The Deltan woman had been one of her very first acquaintances she had made when she had arrived in San Francisco and who had offered her much invaluable advice on how to deal with the difficulties of attracting a great deal of not always wanted attention due the natural characteristics of both their races. "Yes, we reconnected a few years ago after that ugly business with Admiral Leyton. We've stayed in touch quite regularly since then. She's on the *Sutherland*. She's doing pretty well considering."

"That's good."

"Listen, if you want to talk, about anything, I'd be more than happy to be here for you."

His smile became a little wistful. "You always were a great listener."

"And you liked to talk."

Arik's smile became a grin. "Once I stopped stuttering it was difficult to get me to shut up, wasn't it? I don't really have that problem anymore."

Deen ventured a small step closer. "It's really good to see you again."

He nodded. "So, tell me what brought you to this gods forsaken place. This peace treaty? Is it really true?"

She nodded. "Yes. The Dominion surrendered. We were sent here to spread the good news and to prepare you and your people to come back home. General Lam doesn't quite see it that way."

"He must have his reasons."

Deen frowned. "He doesn't trust the Cardassians, that's pretty much all it boils down to. Even the Valerians would rather throw in their lot with them than have this war go on another day. It makes no sense for Lam to try and carry on with this fight."

But the Deltan didn't have a response ready for this. Deen stepped even closer. "Don't tell me you agree with him?"

He didn't look her in the eye when he spoke. "We're Marines, Dee, you wouldn't understand."

"What the hell does that mean?" She felt a sudden anger rising within her, her voice sounding sharper than perhaps she had wanted to. "What's the point to keep fighting for no cause?"

When he looked back at her, his eyes were brimming with his own anger. "We don't leave a job half done. If the Cardassians aren't going anywhere—and as long as they don't surrender—neither will we. We've lost too many good people to just pack up and go home just because the politicians in Paris no longer care what happens here."

"You cannot be serious? So what, you're willing to risk thousands of more lives instead? To what end?"

"To see this through. To make sure those who have already paid a high cost for this war will not have died in vain."

Deen didn't say anything to that but simply stared back at the man she had once been very close to, realizing perhaps for the first time that much more had changed about him than the uniform he now wore.

An uncomfortable silence filled the room.

"I'm sorry, Dee, I didn't mean to fight with you. The truth is, these are decisions made far above my pay grade. I'm just here to achieve an objective and follow orders, whatever they may be. They tell me to go out and fight Cardassians and I'll do that. They tell me to pack up my things and go home, then I'll do that, too."

A heavy sigh escaped her lips. "Blindly following orders is not a good thing, Jonar."

He nodded slightly. "I used to agree with you. But it's different when you are a Marine, Dee. When you are on a battlefield surrounded by men and women you care about, following orders is what keeps you alive. What keeps them alive. It's what keeps us focused. What keeps us strong." His eyes drilled themselves into hers with total conviction. "Victory through strength."

She pinned him with a skeptical look. "You almost sound like a Jem'Hadar."

Arik shrugged. "There is a reason they are such effective soldiers."

She nodded slowly, realizing what an uphill battle it would be for them to try and truly end this war as long as General Lam was determined to continue it. No doubt most Marines on this planet thought like Jonar Arik. And if even he could not be swayed, a Deltan who had once been a promising Starfleet officer, then what hope was there for the others? She turned away and headed for the doors.

"Dee?"

She stopped short to regard her former paramour.

"I didn't say it before but I am glad you came here. I didn't know how much I've missed you until seeing you again."

She managed a smile. "I've missed you too, Jonar."

He carefully stepped towards her. "I wouldn't want you to leave here regretting this unexpected reunion."

"I'm not."

Arik reached out for her, his hand carefully pushed a few strands of her golden locks out of her face and over her shoulder just like he had used to do a long time ago. Deen didn't miss that it was the first time he had tried to touch her since she had come into his cabin. She couldn't deny that she enjoyed it. Couldn't deny that she felt her heart beat a little faster at sensing him so close to her. She had often been likened to a temptress or a siren, thanks to her aura, but even she was not immune to the Deltan

charm. She could have fought it, of course, but when his fingers gently brushed against her face, she knew she didn't want to.

It was she who leaned in to kiss him. It had been a very long time since she had kissed anyone like that. "There was some talk about celibacy?"

Their lips parted for only a moment. "Six years."

"I wouldn't want to ruin this for you." Of course by this point she was already pulling off his shirt.

"This would be worth it."

She slowly pushed him towards the lower bunk even while they continued to exchange passionate kisses. The bunk was small, clearly not designed for more than one occupant but as far as Deen was concerned, where there was a will, there was a way. "Still a charmer, I see."

He had removed her jacket easily and worked on her mustard-colored shirt next "It's what we Deltans do."

They had shed most of their clothes and thoughtlessly littered them all over the floor by the time Arik placed her down gently on his cot. He positioned himself on top of her but didn't move any closer. Instead he simply stared into her bright purple eyes.

"What?"

"I can't believe I could have forgotten how beautiful you are."

She rolled her eyes. "Just not that memorable, I suppose."

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

Deen nodded and reached up to touch his face which she found still surprisingly soft considering his chosen occupation. "I know."

"Are you sure you want this?"

She didn't hesitate again. "With every fiber of my being."

He didn't make her wait a second longer.

Nora Laas was not used to leading away missions, a task usually reserved to either Tazla Star or Commander Xylion. But it appeared that trust was the key term of the week. Captain Owens had trusted Star with taking *Eagle* to investigate *Sacajawea's* distress signal and now Star had paid things forward by letting her handle critical away missions into unknown territory. First the one to the Thulian freighter and now, a much more challenging one to the pirate base on the second moon of Mattias III.

It helped of course that with Star expecting at least some form of resistance, considering their previous encounters with these pirates, that the security chief had exactly the right kind of expertise to deal with such situations. She had often seen herself as a blunt instrument when it came to away missions, ready to pound any potential threat into submission. She understood that this situation would require a great deal more finesse.

It hadn't stopped her however to still approach this mission like any other assault she had ever taken part in.

As time was an issue and as electromagnetic interference in this system made sensors less reliable than usual, she hadn't been able to do quite as much research on her target as she would have liked. What initial scans did reveal was the fact that the pirate compound appeared to be fairly spread out, almost the size of a small village and mostly surrounded by dense jungle-like vegetation and what appeared to be a tropic beach on one side. Life sign readings were indeterminate, but their best guess had it at somewhere between one hundred and one hundred fifty individuals, many of which were likely not directly involved in the pirating activity.

She had decided to deploy with three fire teams made up of a mixture of four Marines and security personnel each and with her leading one directly. Had Wasco been around she would have probably worked closely with him to plan and execute the insertion but she was more than comfortable in taking the lead herself. She knew that on some other ships Marines and Security didn't work well together. This had never been a problem on *Eagle*. As a former Marine herself, the men respected her and she had started cross-training between the two dedicated units soon after the Marines had joined the crew and now prided herself in the fact that they worked together almost as one.

Her heavily armed twelve-man team materialized without incident on a small clearing a few hundred meters east from the base. The air was hot and humid not unlike many other tropical rain forests she had visited. The vegetation consisted out of various-size trees with thick foliage ranging from bright green to dark red colors.

She had exchanged her black, gray and gold duty uniform for standard marine combat fatigues outfitted with intelligent camouflage which was already beginning to adapt to the surrounding environment.

She issued a quick hand signal and the three fire teams split up and entered the jungle to head towards the base, taking thee different and previously agreed upon approach vectors.

Even before they had covered half the distance, Nora could feel a hand on her shoulder. She stopped and looked behind her to see Sergeant Shin-Ja Moon's worried expression as he indicated towards the blue sky above.

Nora's eyes opened wide when she spotted a bright crimson flare plowing through the atmosphere not unlike a shooting star. This one was heading straight for them. "Get down." She followed her own advice and flattened herself to the muddy forest floor.

Not a moment later she heard the detonation of where the torpedo had ripped into the earth, the ground shaking under her from the force of the impact. At least two smaller explosions followed the first as the projectile had apparently found a target; the sounds of screaming yet more proof of its effectiveness.

She hit her combadge, the signal routed through a communications booster one of the Marines was carrying on his back to cut through the electromagnetic interference. "Nora to *Eagle*. What's going on up there? Are we bombarding this place or is this a ground insertion? You can't have it both ways."

Star responded promptly. "*Sacajawea is firing on the surface. We have the situation under control now.*"

The Bajoran exchanged a dubious look with Moon. "What does that mean?"

*"It means: Don't worry about it. You're clear to enter the base. Star out."*

Nora rolled her eyes. Then she recalled the keyword of the week. If Star said there wasn't going to be any more problems with *Sacajawea* firing on the surface than she decided to take her at her word. She tapped her

combadge again. "Nora to all fire teams, proceed to target. That strike is bound to have softened them up for us a little."

She got back on her feet and headed out, taking point as the rest of her team trailed her, keeping low and with their phaser rifles at the ready.

Close to the perimeter of the base she spotted two guards. They had clearly been distracted by the bombardment and were turned away from her, glancing instead towards the other side of the base where dark smoke was rising into the sky.

A quick nod towards Moon let him know what she had planned and both she and the sergeant quietly approached the sentries from behind. She reached for her combat knife strapped to the leg of her fatigues but then hesitated. The war was over and these were not Jem'Hadar soldiers. She sheathed the blade again and made sure Moon was equally going for a non-lethal takedown.

The whole thing lasted no more than five seconds as they stepped up behind the unaware men and put them both in sleeper holds while covering their mouths to keep them from calling out an alarm. Nora placed her victim carefully onto the forest floor before indicating to a private to bind the two men's hands behind their back.

They moved on to the edge of the forest without uttering so much as a single word to each other.

The compound was made up mostly of simple huts and shacks, consistent with the warm climate on the surface but more importantly most of the habitants were far too busy to pay much attention to their jungle surroundings. Instead many were racing towards a makeshift landing area on the other side of the base where Nora could spot at least six old Cardassian escorts, two of which already in flames and two more apparently heavily damaged by torpedo strikes.

Some were trying to deal with the fire, desperately attempting to stop it from spreading to the other vessels before the entire fleet could be neutralized while a few other, braver souls, were boarding the remaining ships, probably hoping to be able to take off before they could suffer the same fate.

Something else suddenly jumped out at her as she was taking a knee close to the large trunk of a tree with massive reddish palms hanging down close to the ground. Something she hadn't quite expected.

Nora hit her combadge again, making sure to keep her voice down. "Nora to Star. We have a visual on the base. And Commander, they're all Valerians."

*"Say again?"*

"Every person I can see within this base is unmistakably Valerian. Some appear to wear uniforms. This is like no pirate base I've ever known."

Star didn't respond right away as she was likely trying to make sense of that report. *"Lieutenant, we need to find out what is going on here. I want you to establish contact."*

Nora nodded. "We bagged a couple of sentries we might be able to convince—"

Phaser blast ripped through the forest a few dozen meters or so to her right and roughly where fire team Charlie had taken position.

"Commander, stand by." She tapped her combadge again. "Jose, what's going on?"

But her deputy who she had placed in charge of Charlie didn't respond straight away. Instead a few more phaser blasts followed the first and she recognized the heavily suppressed sound of the final two blasts as distinctly Starfleet-issue.

*"Sorry, sir." Lieutenant José Carlos' voice sounded stressed. "We were surprised by a couple of sentries. The situation has now been resolved."*

But Nora shook her head. Carlos wasn't quite correct. The commotion had not gone unnoticed by a number of Valerians inside the compound who were now slowly heading towards Charlie's position. "You've got multiple tangos moving in."

*"We got 'em. How do you want to proceed?"*

Carlos had told her that his team had already locked in on the approaching men and was in an ideal position to take them down quickly. Of course doing so, in the open, would eliminate any element of stealth they had managed to retain so far.

It was fight or flight time.

Nora understood that Star wanted to talk to these people but that was going to be difficult if they retreated now. After a quick glance, the experienced tactician in her told her that they were in a very favorable position. Most of the Valerians, many still unarmed and unaware of any threat looming in the surrounding forest, were at a clear disadvantage. If

she aborted now they might not ever get a chance to catch them this unaware again.

They could still talk after these pirates, or whatever they were, had surrendered.

*"All teams, weapons free. Engage at will."*

And so the forest erupted with fire.

But it was precision work at its very finest. The Valerians who had slowly approached Charlie were the first to go down. A handful more unsuspecting men and women were met with the same fate.

It was a good opening gambit as far as those things could go but Nora understood that few ground battles could be won without pressing an advantage as long as you held it. They needed to keep up the pressure before their opponents had a chance to fully regroup. After all numbers were not on her side.

She spotted a decent sized shack about a hundred meters from the jungle periphery that she quickly established would give them an excellent vantage point. She taped her combadge. *"Beta, Charlie; Alfa will be moving out to the structure at my ten o'clock. I need you both to reposition to cover our flanks. Report when ready."*

Both team leaders curtly acknowledged before they went on the move. Nora indicated to the three other members of her team to pick up the slack, laying down heavy fire while the other units changed position in the jungle around them.

*"Charlie's in place."*

*"Beta, ready."*

*"Commence cover. Alfa is Oscar Mike."* With that the forest at her flanks once again began to spit phaser fire and she quickly led her team out in the open, keeping low and firing a few well-aimed blasts to catch stragglers who hadn't seen the new threat before making it safely behind the cover the wooden structure provided.

She lowered her rifle as she spied through one of the glass-free windows. There were three armed hostiles inside, shouting animatedly and hurrying back and forth as they were desperately trying to find out which way the attack was coming from. Nora indicated to her team with hand gestures how many men she had spotted inside and how she wanted to proceed; stealthily and without letting anyone know how close they truly were.

Slinging her rifle onto her back, she reached for her sidearm and began to open the simple wooden door very slowly with her other hand.

They had to act quickly in order to take all three Valerians down before anyone knew what had happened. Thankfully this was hardly Nora's first rodeo. She had lost count how many times she'd snuck up on unsuspecting Cardassians during her time in the Bajoran resistance. She didn't cherish those memories other than relying on the experiences she had gained from them, experiences which had become invaluable in situations like these.

She took aim at the man nearest to her who had his back turned, ready to cut him down before swiftly moving on to the next.

However, besides talent and expertise in ambushing an enemy, Nora knew that more often than not there were also much more intangible factors at work. Some called this luck even if she did not prescribe to that particular concept at all. It mattered little at that moment if she was a believer or not. Hers had simply run out.

The man to her right had turned and spotted her before she could get off the shot. And he didn't hesitate and in a moment of remarkable lucidity, he threw himself at this new threat, thereby preventing Nora from using her weapon, and instead throwing them both towards the floor.

In the process of doing so, the door shut close again, cutting her off from the rest of her team for at least a couple of seconds.

In close quarter combat, a couple of seconds could equate to an eternity.

The assault team's weapons were set to stun but to assume that their enemy would show similar restraint could have been a deadly mistake.

Nora had little time to plan, much less think, and instead her survival instincts kicked in as she was being forcefully thrown to the ground, knowing full well that she was surrounded by armed enemy fighters now who would not hesitate to open fire once they got a clear shot.

She grabbed hold tightly of the attacker who had run into her as they both went down and then using gravity—which was a fortunate Earth-similar 1.2 gees on this moon—to her advantage, pulling at him hard even as she rolled into a ball as she hit the floor, then extended her legs to use them to catapult the man up and above her head, sending him crashing into the far wall.

And with him, most likely, went her stealth approach.

She took no time at all to rest but used her own momentum to jump back onto her feet. Her phaser had gone flying out of her hand and she didn't have the time to retrieve the rifle at her back. The second man, the one she had targeted initially, had already brought his own weapon to bear to blow her away at point blank range.

A quick roundhouse kick liberated him from his rifle. She followed through on her pirouette-like move and reached out for the third man's weapon, grabbing the bulky stock and drove it hard into the surprised Valerian's solar plexus, before ripping it out of his hands completely.

Still moving—she hadn't stopped yet—she swung the freed rifle around like a bat, the grip impacting harshly against the side of the second man's head, who was immediately knocked down with a nasty, bloody head wound.

The first man had since climbed onto his feet again and with aggression brimming in his eyes, he charged the Bajoran intruder at full speed.

He would have done himself a favor had he not telegraphed the attack with a loud roar, allowing Nora to see him coming and sidestepping just at the right moment. He went flying passed her but managed to whip around quickly.

What he apparently hadn't expected however was that Nora would throw him his colleague's rifle which he caught clumsily. Before he could even think of what to do with it, the security chief stood in front of him, driving the lower end of her palm into his neck with such force, it quite literally took his breath away.

He reached up for his throat, thereby dropping the rifle, and Nora went in a crouch to sweep the legs out from underneath him which sent him down onto his hands and knees.

Driving her elbow hard into his back, flattened the man to the floor and for all intents and purposes took him out of the fight.

Nora knew before she had delivered the final blow that at least one man remained behind her, more than likely already recovered from having his own rifle driven into his midsection. She freed her five inch baton from her belt as she span around on her heels, a quick flick of her wrist was all that was needed to extend it to its full length.

The third man had indeed recovered and found his combat knife but was not close to fast enough for Nora Laas who had yet to even slow down.

The first strike hit his right, knife wielding-hand with pinpoint accuracy, causing it to clatter to the floor, the second impacted on his left thigh, all but taking out his leg and he began to topple to his side, before the final blow struck him across his right temple which turned out to be more than he could bare. He landed flat on his face, out cold.

It was only then that Nora finally stopped, leaning forward, with her hands on her knees, catching a much-needed lungful of air. She turned to look towards the entry where the rest of her team had since taken a knee, their weapons ready to fire. The whole fight had lasted perhaps ten ticks, more then enough time for them to have made it inside and assist their CO. They had instead chosen not to intervene.

She responded to Shin-Ja Moon's dumbfound expression at looking over the unconscious bodies littered on the floor with a frown. "What?"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am, but it was my understanding we were suppose to open a dialogue with these people."

She considered her handy work for a moment and then shrugged. "Heat of the moment."

He nodded understandingly.

"And you guys could have helped out at any point, you know that, right?"

"It looked to me you had things well in hand.."

She nodded with a little smile, now fully recovered from the incident, and pointed at the bodies. "Secure these men." She recovered her own firearm and replaced it in its holster before taking position underneath one of the windows overlooking the rest of the compound.

As expected she had an excellent view of the rest of the base from here. But her close and personal rumble with her opponents and not gone unnoticed by the Valerians outside who were quickly increasing in number, even while Beta and Charlie continued to lay down heavy cover fire. The Valerians were beginning to regroup and the shack she had liberated would quickly become their first target. She needed a new plan and quickly. Thankfully, adapting to changing circumstances was yet another trait she had mastered thanks to her history in guerilla warfare, not to mention her stint in the Cardassian Border Wars as a Marine.

After the three Valerians inside had been tied up, Nora directed the rest of her people to take position by the other windows. She tapped her combadge. "All teams, ready stun grenades, widest possible spread. We'll go Charlie to Alfa on my mark."

She swiftly reached for her combat helmet which was secured behind her and slipped it over her head. With a couple of taps to its side, the helmet secured itself and a visor dropped down in front of her eyes. The other men followed her example.

Nora tapped her combadge twice, giving the signal, and then brought up her rifle to start firing at the opposing Valerians, this time being assisted by the sensors in her helmet which fed targeting information right into the heads-up display.

As she had instructed Charlie dropped their grenades first, letting them fly in a high arc so that all four devices rained right on top of the unsuspecting enemy. Each one exploded with a bright flash and smoke. The Valerians cried out in shock and surprise. Nora and her team were unaffected as the visors easily compensated for the bright, disorientating light show.

The Valerians who tried to retreat into the opposite direction found themselves right in the crosshairs of Beta's stun grenades flying in from the opposite direction. And once those had done their job, Nora and her team added theirs to the mix for maximum coverage.

The very few who had not been taken down or rendered incapable to hold a weapon by the grenades were easily picked off by the pinpoint, target-assisted phaser fire. After all through their visors, the smoke was no factor at all.

Nora kept scanning for targets and found another one quickly, highlighted clearly on her HUD. The short woman seemed somewhat lost as she stumbled across the open, heading roughly towards one of the larger buildings. She lined up her shot and just before she was able to squeeze the trigger, her target turned slightly to reveal her face.

Nora realized her mistake. This wasn't a short woman at all. It was a child. No older than twelve or thirteen and definitely not a combatant.

She spotted an older woman rushing towards the child with frantic expediency, grabbing her and trying to pull her out of the open with what appeared to be motherly concern.

Nora didn't fire. Instead she tapped her combadge again. "All teams, cease fire."

And just as quickly as the assault had commenced it came to an end.

The very few Valerians still standing fired a few more rounds towards her general position and into the jungle but by this time it was far too little, far too late.

“Hold your fire.” Nora shouted from the top of her lungs to make herself heard. “Hold your fire.”

The last blasts died down and slowly so did the smoke which had obstructed most of the battlefield.

“We have you surrounded. The smart thing to do here is to lay down your weapons and surrender.”

She spotted a solitary figure slowly standing up from behind an impromptu barricade of a few crates and barrels. Like most Valerians the man had long and flowing bright hair which looked almost orange under the powerful Mattias sun. He held his head high and if she had to guess, she would have called him a leader of sorts. He wore a brown uniform jacket she didn't recognize. “You are Starfleet?”

Nora nodded. “That's right.” She understood that this didn't mean what it used to. Starfleet couldn't claim to still enjoy the best of reputations any longer, especially since many races who had stayed out of the Dominion War had accused the Federation of bringing the Jem'Hadar back with them from the Gamma Quadrant. But at least she knew that very few people had to fear Starfleet the same way they had to fear the Dominion. If nothing else, most races could count on the fact that they'd not be mistreated at the hands of Starfleet officers.

Her eyes dropped to the beaten and bloodied bodies of the Valerians she had dispatched earlier and wondered if this was still true. She couldn't say with absolute certainty if she would have displayed that same kind of aggression and uncompromising force before the war. She knew the conflict had changed everyone who had partaken in it, but until that moment she had not fully realized by how much it had changed her as well.

“If you are from Starfleet, we have nothing further to discuss. We'll fight until the last man if we have to but we're not going to make this easy for you.”

That had not been the response she had expected, not with the superior force and firepower they had displayed here today and with their victory all but assured. She aimed a puzzled look at Moon crouching nearby. But he had no answers to give either.

She knew she had a choice to make as the Valerian was heading back behind his cover, anticipating the fight to continue. Nora knew precisely how to respond to this situation. To ensure to keep her people safe, she had to see this through until all opposition had been neutralized. It was how

the rules of engagement dictated she proceeded. It was how she would have dealt with this during the war.

Then she remembered what she had said on *Eagle* just before setting out on this mission. Was she really able to be more than just a fighter? She took a deep, courage-building breath of air and decided it was time to find out.

Taking a page out of Tazla Star's book, she easily slipped out of the window and into the open, slinging her rifle onto her back and removed her helmet.

Of course this caused every weapon not belonging to her team to take a bead on her. She decided to ignore that little fact for the time being. Star had told her to be diplomatic and even though she knew she'd never be nominated for a peace price, she knew this was her one and only chance to end this without any further casualties. "If you prefer we can go back to shooting at each other but I'm telling you right now, I've been in enough fire fights in my life to know that we have a decisive tactical advantage. I could turn this place upside down if I wanted to and that's not even mentioning the two starships in orbit. You have children here, I didn't know that, and I don't want to risk hurting them. So what do you say we try talking instead of shooting? I'll be honest, it's not really what I'm good at but if you are willing to try it out, I'll be all for it."

More armed Valerians were coming out of the woodwork as she spoke and at least one of those Cardassian ships managed to lift off. She couldn't help feeling that perhaps she had overplayed her hand.

"You're here to help the Thulians get rid of us. Why should we listen to you?"

She shook her head. "You have the wrong idea. Or at least, I think maybe we do."

That seemed to interest the Valerian and he slowly left the barricade to approach Nora with two of his men flanking him closely. Their rifle emitters remained squarely pointed at the Starfleet security officer and Nora had to fight the urge of bringing up her own weapon.

As he stepped closer she guessed the man to be somewhere around middle age. His uniform displayed a few more insignia than some of the others.

"I'll go on a limb here and say that you and your people are not pirates."

He shook his head. "No, but I'm sure the Thulians would want to make you believe that."

"This is related to their cargo runs, isn't it?"

The man considered Nora suspiciously, still refusing to lower his weapon. "You are really going to stand there and tell me that you don't know about this? Your people are the reason why we're doing all this. The Thulians are the ones who are helping you win this cursed war of yours which you are fighting on our world."

Nora Laas looked back at the man with a completely befuddled expression. "I think you better start at the beginning." She activated her combadge. "Nora to Star."

*"Go ahead, Lieutenant. What's your status?"*

"You've asked me to make contact. Consider it made, Commander. And I think you might want to hear what they have to say."

## PART VI THE LAST CAMPAIGN

### 1

"I have solid intelligence that the war with the Dominion is over, Grent. All I'm saying is that perhaps we need to reevaluate our objectives here on Valeria as well."

The Tellarite colonel's base was less than fifty miles to the east of FOC Phoenix and even at this short distance, the channel was anything but clear, laced with static and the occasional distortion. It was however just clear enough to notice him wrinkling his creased forehead and the twitching of his snout like nose.

Owens who sat nearby but outside the comm station's viewfinder didn't necessarily read this as a bad omen, knowing full well that most Tellarites looked perpetually annoyed.

*"And how precisely have you come into possession of this intelligence, Colonel?"*

Van der Meer's features hardened. "The how is not what matters here."

The man grunted and looked off the screen for a brief moment before glancing back her way. *"There are rumors that a Starfleet vessel has visited Valeria and that there was a meeting with the general. Things apparently didn't go very well."*

"And I'm very concerned about this, Grent. If they've come here to advise us of a general ceasefire, or even a peace treaty, aren't we duty bound to seek such a resolution here as well?"

*"Sure, but I doubt Gul Metral would see it that way."*

"What if he did? And what if it were Lam who resisted any kind of overtures of peace?"

He considered her suspiciously. *"Ridiculous. What is it you are suggesting exactly?"* He moved closer to the screen before ensuring that nobody was close by on his end to overhear their conversation. *"Disobeying direct orders?"*

"I'm saying that this warrants a closer look. And that perhaps Lam is wrong. In which case we may need to take action. I have proof I could show you—"

But the Tellarite quickly shook his head as he leaned back. *"I'm not interested and I'm not going to be the first commander in the history of the Starfleet Marine Corps to disobey direct orders from a commanding general. And you should think very carefully if that's a precedent you wish to be responsible for. This conversation is over. Because I consider you a friend, I shall extend you the courtesy of pretending this discussion never happened. Grent out."*

And with that his face vanished from the screen.

Van der Meer uttered a heavy sigh before she glanced at Owens and Belore sitting close by.

The Cardassian spoke up first. "You could have pushed him harder."

"If I had pushed him any harder he would have been even more suspicious than he already was. And friendship or not, at that point he may have started proceedings to have me removed of my command. Grent outranks me."

But Belore was not satisfied. "Perhaps some friendships will have to be sacrificed for the purpose of peace, Colonel. No matter how uncomfortable the idea might be to you."

The tall woman stood from her chair, her muscles tensing noticeably. "I suggest you watch your tone with me, Gul. I believe I have shown you a fair amount of latitude since you arrived here considering that I have standing orders to shoot Cardassians on sight."

Belore stood as well, showing off some of his own mettle. "That's exactly the attitude you need to overcome, Colonel. We're at peace now."

She didn't back down. "From what I understand, you surrendered. So technically you are a prisoner of war. Perhaps start acting like one."

Owens left his chair also and positioned himself between the two vexed parties. "Alright, let's both calm down. There's no point in fighting each other. Our mission is to try and find a way to stop the fighting altogether."

"That's *your* mission, Captain." Van der Meer's anger had not yet subsided. "My mission is to try and win this war." She stepped away from her two guests to put some distance between them, keeping her back to both.

"Just as I thought." Belore looked at Owens. "Don't you see, Captain, she's still committed to her general and his agenda, she couldn't care less that there is a peace or not."

Wasco who had stood to one side, leaning against the wall of the communications room, took a step towards the Cardassian now. "The colonel took us in, didn't she? She had no reason to do so, in fact she could have let them take us back to the general. There is no point in questioning her loyalties."

Belore waved him off. "Right now I'm questioning the loyalties of your entire order, Major. What madness of having a whole army so deluded by the insane fantasies of a single man that they are unable to see the truth."

Van der Meer whirled around to skewer the man with a poisonous glare. "Says the Cardassian. Who no doubt was among the first to follow a mad man called Dukat to join with the Dominion to declare war on the entire Alpha Quadrant."

He held her sharp scolding stare. "I was never among those. But I have met Gul Dukat so I recognize a mad man when I see one."

"That's enough." Owens was determined to put an end to this. "I think we could all use a little break."

The Cardassian glanced at the captain, offered a short nod and then turned and left the room.

Van der Meer gestured towards Wasco. "Keep an eye on him, Cesar, make sure he doesn't wander off too far. We wouldn't want our Cardassian guest go get hurt now, would we?"

The major understood and followed Belore out of the room.

Just as he stepped out, Sergeant Jonar Arik entered. He exchanged a respectful nod with the exiting major and then quickly came to attention in front of the colonel.

Owens could tell that there was something different about the Deltan, something he hadn't noticed about him before.

"At ease, Sergeant." Van der Meer could see it too. "Are you feeling alright?"

The man relaxed but offered her a perplexed look. "I'm fine, ma'am. Why do you ask?"

"You seem to be, I don't know, glowing?"

Arik looked embarrassed. "Must be a ... uh, hormonal thing."

"If you say so."

He quickly remembered why he had come. "Ma'am, your presence has been requested in the command room."

She nodded. "Lead the way."

Owens watched them leave. He didn't join them. Van der Meer had asked her guests to stay clear of her command staff as much as possible, not comfortable that they would fully appreciate their presence on base. After having witnessed Grent's reaction to Van der Meer's mere suggestions, he didn't think it was a bad idea.

He didn't stay in the room by himself for long. Only moments after the colonel and the sergeant had left, Deen joined him.

It didn't take him long to realize that she had that same glow that Jonar Arik had sported. And it wasn't just caused by her aura this time. He regarded her with stark suspicion evident in his eyes.

She returned his look with youthful innocence, something that tended to come quite naturally to her. "What is it?"

"Don't give me that."

"Don't give you what?"

Michael wasn't buying this act at all. "You have some nerve, you know that?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He shook his head. "You're a horrendous liar, Dee. I just didn't realize you could be a hypocrite as well."

She looked hurt at his harsh words.

"Jonar Arik was just in here a minute ago and he had precisely that same look on his face as you do now."

She didn't try to defend herself in light of this damning evidence.

"You went to see him, didn't you?"

She nodded slowly. "So what? Is there a law against catching up with an old friend I'm not aware of?"

"Just catch up?"

She uttered a heavy sigh. "Fine, no, it was more than that, alright? Are you happy now? I do not understand why you have to make this such an issue."

Michael stepped close to her. "Dee, I don't mind in the least who you get involved with." He stopped himself, reconsidering his words. "No, that's not true, I do. You are my friend and I don't want you to get hurt. I remember Arik from the Academy, he was a nice young man then but he's changed."

She shrugged. "We've all changed, Michael."

"In his case, it's more like a transformation, wouldn't you say?"

Deen shook her head. "It's mostly a front. He's not so different to the way he once was when we first met. Some of his beliefs may have altered over time and he's gone through quite a bit in the years since but at his core he's still that same man."

"All I'm saying is be careful."

She offered a sweet smile. "Thank you for your concern."

Michael's expression turned more serious. "Now, about me and Sharval –"

She didn't let him finish. "I'm not a hypocrite, Michael. Jonar and I are completely different. First of all, we've got history. And besides, I'm not the one who is already involved with another person."

Owens knew she had him there. "Let's just drop this."

Her accusatory purple eyes softened. "Any luck with finding more allies to our cause?"

He sighed and shook his head. "No, not really. The colonel spoke to three battalion commanders and not one even wanted to consider the possibility that Lam could be wrong. Nobody was interested in as much as looking over the evidence, not even the Vulcan colonel she spoke to."

"This isn't going to be easy."

Van der Meer returned then, rushing back into the room along with Wasco, Belore and Sharval, the latter almost immediately sidling up close to Owens. He ignored her for now and instead considered the colonel's concerned expression. "What's the matter?"

"The general just made an announcement." She stepped up to the comm station and activated the screen which promptly showed an image of Lam sitting behind his desk. This time the transmission was much clearer than what it had been when van der Meer had contacted her fellow battalion commanders.

*"... and I wish to clarify these rumors. A Starfleet vessel has indeed stopped by here at Valeria and I briefly met with its crew. However, they had to depart again to deal with another pressing issue in a neighboring sector of space and were not able to remain to assist us in any way. It makes no difference. Second Regiment, Fourth Division of the Starfleet Marine Corps does not require any outside assistance to defeat our enemy and to ensure the Valerians have a future free of fear from Cardassian terror and brutality.*

*We stand now at the cusp of final victory and I ask all of you to show me, one last time, the faith and loyalty which you have bled and sacrificed for much longer and much harder than any general or politician back home could have ever expected.*

*Your commanders will shortly issue you orders which will secure this victory for us and for our Valerian friends. So I ask each and every one of you for this one final sacrifice. For Valeria, for the Federation, for the men and women fighting at your side.*

*Be smart, stay focused and stay strong. Victory – only through strength. Always.”*

The transmission ended and was replaced with the chevron-shaped Marine emblem which was only a slight variation of the one the regular fleet used.

Van der Meer turned to the others. “I just received those orders. I am to prepare the entire battalion for a push towards the Cardassian command post deep inside their territory. It’s a highly orchestrated campaign involving every frontline battalion. According to Lam we are to receive additional resources to support this offensive in just under eight hours and move out in ten.”

Owens took a seat. It was the very move he had come here to prevent.

Belore shot the woman a warning glance. “Metral will push back as hard as he must. He is not going to make this easy for you.”

“I’m not expecting him to.”

“And what about the hundreds of settlements between here and the Cardassian command post?” Sharval had lost any trace of her previous amusement, her features now serious and unapologetic. “What about the innocents caught in the crossfire, Colonel? How are you expecting them to avoid this all-out offensive of yours?”

“My standing orders are to take every precaution to avoid casualties among the civilian populace.”

“Even at the cost of your own people?” Sharval’s voice remained intense. “Even if it might cost you a tactical advantage? Even if it may cost you victory?”

Van der Meer diverted her eyes, the answer was obvious.

Wasco regarded her old friend. “Svea, are you really planning to follow these orders?”

“What other choice do I have?”

“Easy.” Belore took a step towards her. “While all other battalions are moving against my people, you move yours against Lam, arrest him for disregarding orders and arrange an immediate truth with Metral.”

“This is a very carefully planned campaign which relies on every frontline battalion carrying out a specific objective. If mine does not participate it will leave others vulnerable.” She decisively shook her head. “I am not willing to be responsible for that.”

Owens had walked over to the comm station and was replaying Lam’s announcement with the sound turned down.

Deen followed him. “What are you thinking?”

She regarded her and then van der Meer. “Why is it his signal is coming across so clearly? Before the connections were severely limited and unstable. Even when we tried to contact you from orbit.”

“The general has a communications relay station just outside the capital to communicate with the his regiment across Valeria and to issue orders. It is powerful enough to cut through scramblers, at least on this side of the border.”

Deen raised an eyebrow. “The same communications station he claimed had been destroyed?”

The colonel had no answer to this.

“We need to gain access to it and send our own broadcast,” said Owens.

Belore looked skeptical. “What makes you think that would work? The colonel already tried that approach and it failed.”

“That’s because we tried to contact people individually. We need to send a general broadcast that reaches every Marine on this planet at the same time. And we’ll broadcast the surrender documents and peace treaty along with it, making it impossible for anyone to ignore the truth and the fact that the general is disobeying his orders and following his personal agenda by continuing this war. I don’t care how loyal you think Marines are to their commanders, they’re not blind or stupid. At the very least they will think twice before embarking on this offensive.”

Van der Meer was not yet convinced. “The relay station is going to be heavily defended.”

“But not as much as the fusion plant, I’m sure.” Owens shot her an insistent look. “We won’t need your entire battalion but you have to give us a platoon or at least a few squads so that we can take over the station.”

“I don’t like it.”

“What’s the alternative, Colonel? How many people do you stand to lose in this offensive? And not just in your battalion. This is our best chance to end this for once and for all before any more lives are needlessly lost. The general is claiming he’s doing this for Valeria but all this will achieve is destroy more of their homes and create further casualties. The general thinks he’s doing all this for them but the truth is if he goes through with this, it will be fifty years before the Valerians will even consider trading with the Federation ever again, not to mention consider us as an ally or even becoming a member some day.”

At that Sharval uttered a sharp laugh. “Make that a hundred years. At this point I’d be happy if I don’t ever see another Federation citizen again in my lifetime.” She glanced at Owens then, looking a little guilty. “With maybe one or two exceptions.”

His focus remained on van der Meer. “The general spoke about sacrifices for peace but he has this all backwards. His sacrifice is to escalate an unnecessary war which will only bring more suffering and repercussions which will hurt the Federation in the long term. A true sacrifice is to stand up to what is right, even in the face of great opposition, to make the hardest choices, the ones which are the most difficult to contemplate. To dedicate oneself to those choices completely because you know deep down that they are the right ones. If you truly believe the right thing to do here is to follow his orders and throw your people at the Cardassians, I cannot stop you. But if you know, as I do, that nothing good can come out of that, then help me put a stop to all this – here and now.”

Silence followed as van der Meer struggled with her next decision, one Owens knew would determine the fate of a great many people.

She finally nodded, reluctantly. “I’ll give you the men you need, Captain. But in ten hours time, if you haven’t managed to convince Lam or the rest of the Marines on this planet, I will give the order to join the assault.”

It wasn’t what he had hoped for but it was good enough of a compromise for now. It also, of course, didn’t give him much time. He gave her a curt nod and then regarded the others. “Let’s go and end a war.”

She had listened carefully to Nora Laas' report as well as the story the man who had since identified himself as Whetal, a senior officer in the small and officially disbanded Valerian Space Force had to tell. And the longer she had listened to it, the more it made sense and the angrier she became.

Once she had heard enough, she had the comm link to the surface closed and turned to her most senior officers on the bridge, both having overheard every single word.

Katanga was slowly shaking his head. "I've heard a lot of crazy stories in my life but this clearly ranks in the top percentage. It's difficult to believe that a Starfleet officer would go along with such a plan."

Xylion raised an eyebrow. "It stands to reason that General Lam was not aware of the entire scope of the plan put in place regarding Valeria."

"Ignorance is no excuse."

Star agreed. "I suppose it is safe to say that we're done here."

The doctor nodded. "We need to get back to Valeria. The captain needs to be made aware. I would think that this changes everything regarding our mission."

Star glanced at the Vulcan tactical officer. "Mister Trinik, get me Mahoney on the *Sacajawea*." She suppressed a little smirk but in truth she couldn't wait to see his face when he learned that he had been duped, that his glorious little mission to hunt down pirates was nothing more than a cleverly orchestrated charade to serve a larger purpose. And there definitely wasn't going to be any opportunity to deepen diplomatic relations with the Thulians. On the contrary.

The voice which came over the speaker did not belong to Mahoney but to *Sacajawea's* half Romulan first officer. "*Commander, we have a situation over here. I don't know how long I can keep this channel open but –*" A sudden burst of static drowned out his words.

Star whipped around towards the screen to get a look at the other starship in orbit. But there was nothing out of the ordinary to be gleamed there. "Commander Leva? What's your situation?"

"*This is Captain Mahoney speaking. The situation is under control. Do not –*" But his voice also cut out and then the channel went completely dead.

“What in the name of Hippocrates’ staff is going on over there?”

She had no answers to Katanga’s question nor did she believe any were forthcoming from the other ship.

Trinik confirmed that much. “I am unable to reestablish communications.”

“What’s the status of their defensive systems?”

“Shields and weapons are powered down.”

She glanced at her acting XO next to get his input which he offered promptly. “Two conflicting messages from the ship’s captain and the first officer. It is possible a mutiny is under way on the *Sacajawea*.”

Star nodded, she had reached the same conclusion.

But Katanga was having a harder time believing this. “Mutiny on a Starfleet vessel? You cannot be serious?”

“With Mahoney involved nothing surprises me anymore.” She shot Xylion another look. “Commander, get an armed security team to meet me in transporter room four.”

“Wait a minute.” Katanga was clearly not happy about this plan. “You want to go over there yourself? Doesn’t this fall more into Lieutenant Nora’s department?”

Xylion was of the same mind. “The Doctor is correct. As *Eagle’s* acting commanding officer you should avoid putting yourself in a potentially hazardous situation.”

She couldn’t help but smirk. “Both your concern is noted but Nora is still planetside and we don’t have the time to bring her back for this.” It wasn’t strictly speaking true, after all it wouldn’t have been such a great effort to beam the security chief and her Marines directly from the surface of the moon onto the *Sacajawea*. But the truth was, hazardous or not, she wanted to see Mahoney’s face when he learned the truth. Or better yet, if his crew had turned against him for legitimate reasons, she did not want to miss out on the satisfaction of throwing him into a brig herself. “Commander, see if you can get a message through to Leva without making Mahoney aware. Let him know we’re coming over and to meet us in *Sacajawea’s* main transporter room.” Then she turned towards Katanga, giving him a good-natured clasp against his upper arm. “Don’t worry so much, Eli, things may finally be going my way.” She headed for the turbolift before he could offer a response.

“Won’t do you much good if you end up dead.”

But only Xylion remained to overhear his comment which he did with another raised eyebrow before he went to carry out the task Star had asked of him.

Even though she knew time was a factor, she still made a quick stop on deck fifteen to have one last, brief word with their prisoner who confirmed to her pretty much the entire story Whetal had given her without too much prompting.

Secure in the knowledge that these men were likely speaking the truth, she arrived in the transporter room where a five-man team of heavily armed security guards was already waiting for her. She had two additional teams stand by just in case.

*"Lieutenant Commander Xylion to Commander Star. I have been able to establish communications with Lieutenant Commander Leva through a secure channel. He is standing by to receive you in transporter room one on the Sacajawea."*

Star nodded and glanced at the Andorian woman standing behind the console. She offered the Trill a quick nod to confirm she had the coordinates for their destination and was ready to commence transport.

"Excellent. Are their shields still down?"

*"Yes, sir."*

"Good. You are in charge, Commander, hopefully I won't be long." She stepped onto the platform on which her team had already positioned itself and then glanced at the Andorian. "Energize."

Tazla Star and the security guards materialized only moments later in a very similar transporter room. As a precaution she had raised and readied her rifle before transport but when she spotted Leva and a Bolian lieutenant awaiting their arrival, she realized it had not been necessary and she lowered her weapon before stepping off the platform. "Commander, mind telling me what's going on?"

"The captain tried to continue to fire on that pirate base even after you had confirmed you had a team on surface and *Eagle* had moved to block us. I had to take action. He didn't take it very well."

"No surprise there. What's the situation now and where is Mahoney?"

Leva shook his head slightly. "Honestly, it's a bit of a mess. The crew doesn't really know what to do and most are trying to stay out of this altogether. I managed to get a handful of officers on my side and have been

able to disable security and tactical systems. Mahoney is still on the bridge with a few officers loyal to him.”

Star frowned. Mutinies were rare enough but when they happened they tended to be anything but straightforward and nothing like what novels or holodeck adventures would have one believe. It wasn't as if there was a manual or a rulebook to cover this eventuality considering how rare such an occurrence was in Starfleet these days. But the fact that the majority of the crew had not chosen sides actually made things easier, the last thing she wanted was for a firefight to break out between Starfleet personnel in the ship's corridors.

She had brought a spare phaser rifle and tossed it to Leva who was only armed with a type-II sidearm. “Time to break the stalemate, Commander. Let's head for the bridge and arrest Mahoney. As far as I'm concerned he's crossed a line and you had every right to stand up to him.” She tried to hide her own satisfaction at these turn of event but she probably wasn't entirely successful in concealing that little gleam in her green eyes.

Leva caught the weapon easily. “I believe you know the way.”

She nodded. That she did indeed. “Weapons on stun. Only fire if you are fired upon until we get to the bridge. The plan is to give Mahoney a chance to surrender.”

The five security guards, Leva and the Bolian stepped carefully out into the corridor, led by Star herself. Things appeared quiet. Somebody, likely Mahoney, had triggered the red alert and bright crimson strobes flashed all along the bulkheads.

They proceeded slowly down the corridor and came across only a few crewmembers none of which appeared particularly certain of what was happening on their own ship or what, if anything, to do about it. Star instructed everyone she spotted to head back to their quarters and stay there until the situation was resolved. Most followed her orders without question. She didn't really have the time however to ensure that they did.

She had her team stop short when they reached the turbolift.

The Bolian woman who had since identified herself to Star as Lieutenant Alendra, pointed at the doors. “That's the way to the bridge.”

Star nodded but considered the doors for another moment without making a move. Then she approached slowly and called the lift. The doors opened when it arrived and they found it empty. Star didn't step inside.

Leva shot her a quizzical glance. “Commander?”

“If you had a crew mutinying against you, wouldn’t disabling easy access to the bridge be the first thing you’d do?”

He nodded slowly. “It’s a trap.”

“There are other ways onto the bridge. We could use the Jeffries tubes.”

Star glanced at the lieutenant and nodded when *Sacajawea’s* deck layout slowly came back to her. She regarded Leva next. “Take Alendra and two men and make your way to the briefing room behind the bridge using the Jeffries tubes. We’ll head to the ready room. Wait for my signal to take the bridge.”

Leva nodded sharply and left with the three others.

Star re-programmed the turbolift before she led her team into the opposite direction.

Their climb towards deck one was uneventful and they came across no opposition or obvious traps. They reemerged in a small closet directly adjacent to the captain’s ready room on deck one which itself was located directly next to the main bridge. Star crawled out of the Jeffries tube hatch first and with great care, fully cognizant that Mahoney may have retreated to his office. It would have made things easier as they could have confronted him right then and there.

The closet was empty and so was the ready room.

“Clear.” She kept her voice down to ensure that whoever was on the bridge remained unaware of their presence in the adjacent room.

Star glanced around the ready room briefly, remembering the times she had spent behind that desk. Mahoney had given it his own personal touch of course, including a somewhat out of place antique and wooden cabinet in the corner. She spotted a half empty glass sitting on his desk, containing what looked and smelled like whiskey. She wasn’t surprised that Mahoney had taken up drinking on duty.

She didn’t approach the doors leading to the bridge directly, trying to avoid tripping the sensor and having them open before they were ready. Instead she kept to the bulkhead. Glancing down at the panel next to the door she realized that they had been sealed from the other side. A smart move by Mahoney, she had to give him that.

Trying to bypass the lock would have taken too much time and the effort would have probably not gone unnoticed by those on the bridge. So instead she gestured two of her men to aim their rifles at the door, the implication was obvious: *stand-by to blow it down.*

The two guards nodded and changed the settings on their weapons from stun to explosive force. It also meant that they would not be able to open fire at any living targets as soon as the obstacle was removed but that was a sacrifice she had to accept.

Star tapped her combadge twice, the agreed signal for Leva to make his move in five seconds time. She surmised he was likely facing a similar obstacle. The signal also caused the turbolift to race towards the bridge.

Then she waited until she could hear the commotion on the other side of those doors. They had taken the bait. She heard the lift open and pretty much at the same time a barrage of phaser fire being unleashed, likely directly into the empty lift.

She gave her men the go ahead.

They didn't hesitate and blasted the door, causing both panels to blow out onto the bridge.

Star and the remaining security guard were through the doorway first, both taking immediate aim at the group of officers who had fired into the lift and they neutralized two before they had even fully realized that that the lift had been nothing more than a distraction.

Leva's team had made entry at the same time and he and his people stunned two more of Mahoney's men.

Star took stock of the situation. After the first four men had gone done, only four more remained including Mahoney himself who stood close to his chair with a female Vulcan ensign at his side.

The Vulcan fired at Star's team and managed to take out one of her security guards before she along with her captain scrambled for cover behind the helm station.

The other two men in Mahoney's group had managed to return a few shots as well, stunning another security officer on Leva's side but were unable to avoid the response and were struck by multiple blasts coming from different angles.

Star confirmed that her downed man was merely stunned and then moved further onto the bridge, keeping her phaser pointed at the helm behind which she knew Mahoney was hiding. She could see Leva and his people doing the same.

"It's over, Evan. Throw away your weapons and come out with your hands up."

"Why am I not surprised that you've decided to throw in your lot with that treacherous Romulan bastard? Any chance to get back at me, right?"

Star uttered a heavy sigh. "Cut the dramatics."

"I'm the captain of this ship, Taz. My ship, do you understand? You and Leva and whoever else followed him are guilty of mutiny and treason. Starfleet will have your commissions for this."

"You are the one who gave an illegal order to fire on fellow Starfleet officers and another starship. You started all this." She felt her emotions rise. "Leva was right to oppose you."

Mahoney uttered a sarcastic laugh. "That was your plan all along, wasn't it? You put those people down there and placed your ship into my line of fire. You wanted this to happen, admit it. But if you really think this will save you and your career you've got another thing coming. There will be a Starfleet inquiry into all this, and I promise you, you'll walk out of that one in chains."

"I'm sure this inquiry will be very interested in your story, Evan. The way you've been completely and entirely duped by the Thulians."

Mahoney remained behind his cover. "What the hell are you babbling about?"

"They are not pirates, Evan, they are part of the Valerian fleet and all they've been doing is trying to keep the Thulians from supporting the warring parties on Valeria."

"That's ridiculous. To what end?"

"So that they can wipe each other out. So that there is nobody left to oppose the Thulian's plans to conquer that world. The world of their ancient enemy." She let that sink in for a moment. "You haven't done anything but helping the Thulians in their plan to wage their own war. But I suppose you were too busy trying to make a name for yourself that you couldn't be bothered about anyone who might get hurt in the process. Story of your life, right, Evan?"

"You goddamned bitch." He peeked out just enough to squeeze off a shot in her general direction. Star ducked in time and the blast went wide. She indicated to her people to hold their fire. After all he had nowhere to go.

There was an urgent conversation between Mahoney and the only person still standing by him. Star couldn't make it out but the result quickly became obvious when the Vulcan slowly emerged and threw her

phaser at Star's feet. She raised her hands and stepped away from the console. "In light of this new information, I wish to surrender myself."

Star nodded and indicated for her to head towards one of her security officers where the ensign surrendered peacefully.

The Trill glanced back to where Mahoney still remained in hiding. "That's it Evan, you're all out of people willing to support you and your misguided ways. End of the line, don't you think?"

He slowly stood and Star noticed that he held on to his phaser. She kept a bead on him and even though she had the overwhelming urge to blast him off his feet, she held her fire, fully aware that he was not pointing that weapon at anybody. She couldn't afford to make any mistakes now, after all he had been right about at least one thing. There would indeed be a Starfleet inquiry about the events that had taken place here and there were enough people beside Mahoney who would have loved to use that opportunity to have her thrown out of the fleet if she mishandled the situation now.

Mahoney did not give the impression of a man defeated and with his back to the wall. Instead he had that grin on his face again. The same grin he had once used to seduce her and which tended to make her sick now. "So you've got it all working the way you wanted. Managed to turn everybody against me."

"You've done that all by yourself, Evan. Now, drop the weapon."

But he continued as if she hadn't even spoken. "You're finally getting your revenge on me, is that it? You think this is over? I haven't even started with you, do you hear me? I'm still going to destroy you Taz and once I'm done with you, you'll have nothing." He glanced at Leva next. "Do you even have the slightest idea who you have decided to follow? Don't you know who that is?" He pointed at the Trill with his empty hand. "That's Tazla Star. The former captain of the USS *Sacajawea*. Court martialed and thrown in jail for getting her own people killed. A place where she should still be rotting today. You think my orders were questionable? You have no idea what this one is capable of. She's a liar and a killer with loyalties to no one."

Star gritted her teeth. "Evan, shut the hell up."

"Or what? You're going to shoot me?" He stepped around the helm station. "No, I don't think so. I think it's time to get the truth out for once and for all. To let everybody know what you really are."

"Eagle to Commander Star."

She uttered a sigh of relief at hearing Xylion's voice. Anything but having to listen to Mahoney ramble on. She kept her rifle trained on him even as she responded to the Vulcan. "Go ahead, Commander."

*"Sir, we have just detected two warships which have appeared in this system. Their engine signatures are consistent with Thulian designs."*

"How long until they get here?" Star looked towards Leva, expecting that she would need his help to deal with this new situation. But she found his eyes opening wide in surprise, glued to the main screen. She turned to follow his glance, passed Mahoney and at the viewer behind him. There she spotted two emerald-colored and dagger-shaped starships heading right towards them. And they were close. Far closer than they had any rights to be. *Eagle* was in the process of moving to intercept them but it was obvious that it was going to be too late.

Xylion's voice came back over the speaker. *"Both vessels appear to have used the electromagnetic interference in this system to mask their approach. They will enter weapon's range in ten seconds. Commander, both vessels have their shields raised and weapons fully powered."*

Star glanced at Mahoney with an annoyed expression. "Damn you, Evan, did you tell the Thulians about this place?"

The captain didn't respond, instead he kept his eyes on the screen and the incoming threat.

His first officer answered in his stead. "He did, Commander."

"That's just great." Star looked back at Leva and then indicated towards the tactical station. "Get our shields up and bring weapons online."

He didn't hesitate but shook his head even as he headed there. "It'll take a moment to undo the lock-out."

Star knew they didn't have the time. She pointed at Alendra next. "Lieutenant, take the helm. Evasive actions."

She offered a curt nod and headed for the conn.

"Incoming!"

Star heard Leva's urgent shout and whipped back towards the screen. The two warships had opened fire.

And just when things had started to go right for a change.

Star cursed her luck. "Brace for impact!"

It wasn't going to be enough.

The shuttle was racing north again, heading back the direction Deen and the rest of the away team had traveled from hours earlier. Van der Meer had provided them with a dozen men, less than half a platoon, led by Jonar Arik who was piloting one of the two shuttles which would carry them close to their destination.

She knew it wasn't quite as many Marines Michael had hoped for but the colonel was still not entirely convinced of the validity of his plan or, for that matter, its chances of success. She had however given them everything she knew about the communication facility, including blueprints, likely troop deployments and access points. Armed with that information Deen was fairly certain they would be able to find a way to sneak into the installation without arousing too much suspicion.

Van der Meer had insisted of course that the assault team did not utilize any kind of deadly force against any Marines they'd encounter and the two Starfleet officers had quickly agreed. Belore and Sharval had initially resisted making any such commitment but when their only other option had been to stay behind at Phoenix, they too had submitted to the stipulation even if she hadn't missed the fact that Michael would have much preferred for at least Sharval to remain at the base instead of coming along on this potentially dangerous mission.

A small frown crossed her features when she thought about whatever it was that was going on between him and the Valerian woman. She had surprised herself by the strong feelings of disapproval she had experienced when she had caught the first inkling that there was more going on between them than just professional courtesy. But she had categorically dismissed Michael's notion that she felt any kind of jealousy, even if in truth, she wasn't entirely so certain; wasn't even sure what jealousy was supposed to feel like.

She decided to dismiss all and any thoughts about the subject. After all she had already made her views on his budding relationship with Sharval quite clear and he was a grown man, fully able to make his own decisions.

Deen was sitting in the back of the shuttle alongside six Marines, none of which she could sense wanted to be part of a mission which would see them pitted against their own people. She glanced towards the front

and at the smooth-headed Deltan at the controls. He was following closely in the wake of the lead shuttle which contained Owens, Wasco, Sharval, Belore and the remaining Marines.

A little smile came over her features when she regarded the pilot. Owens had been right, even if she had not wanted to admit to it, but there was little she could object about his relationship with Sharval now that she had reunited with her Academy beau. Reunited and then some.

She decided to join him. It took her little more than an honest smile for the Marine sitting at Arik's side to surrender his seat to her. Sometimes she felt guilty about the reaction she had on other people. It didn't stop her from taking the seat.

"Hey." She looked at Jonar beside her.

He refused to make eye contact. "Lieutenant."

Deen rolled her eyes. "Aren't we long passed that?"

The Deltan shot her a brief sidelong glance. "This is hardly the time or place for chitchat."

She shrugged. "We've got hours until we get to where we're going. Not much else to do but talk and catch up." She turned her head to look at the Marines behind them, none of which were paying them any undue attention. "And I don't think you're going to keep my little visit to your quarters a secret."

He sighed at that.

Deen regarded him seriously. "You don't regret what happened, do you?"

"No, I don't. It's just, I didn't expect anything like this."

"Well, I didn't exactly come here trying to reconnect with a long lost friend either, you know."

He turned to look at her. "I wasn't joking about the celibacy. I took an oath, a voluntary one, sure, but still. And I broke it. For you."

She nodded understandingly. "I'm sorry."

But he quickly shook his head. "Don't be. I meant it when I said that it was worth it. But Deltans – we don't do something like that lightly. If we ever break such an oath we only do this because..."

"Because what?"

He uttered another sigh. "Because we are serious."

Deen looked forward, staring at the raindrops streaking against the windshield for a brief moment. "You know what we had at the Academy was great. We were both younger, I know, but it could be like that again,

couldn't it?" She turned his way again. "Especially now that this war is over."

He frowned, diverting his eyes.

"Right, I forgot, you don't believe me."

Arik shook his head. "It's not that at all. I have no reason to mistrust you or your captain. And I respect Major Wasco and his uniform, just like I respect Colonel van der Meer. She's my commander and if she gives me an order I will follow it, even if it means that I have to help you turn against the general. But I don't have to like it."

"He's wrong, Jonar. Surely you can see that?"

His intense eyes drove himself deep into hers. "No, I don't see that at all. All I know is that you and your captain seem to disagree with the decisions he's made. But none of you really understand. None of you could ever fully grasp the true meaning of loyalty and what it means to trust another person completely, to trust them with your life. That's the way I feel about General Lam and nothing you or anyone else can say will change that."

Deen considered that for a moment and then shot him a sad smile. "You know that I've never been with another man after we were together?"

His eyes grew with surprise.

She shrugged. "I guess you're not the only one who had taken a celibacy oath. Maybe not a real oath but I happen to feel about intimacy just as strongly as you."

"I didn't know."

Deen nodded. "Jonar, I admire you, I really do. I think I understand what you've been through and the way you've overcome all of that in the manner that you did is awe-inspiring. The way you managed to give your life new meaning and to dedicate yourself to this notion of loyalty is impressive." She leaned in closer to him. "But loyalty can come in a variety of different forms. It's not just about complete dedication to one man or even an organization or a group of people you fight alongside with. You can also show loyalty to an idea. How about loyalty to peace and fighting as hard as you possibly can to achieve that goal?" She shrugged and then stood. "That's where my loyalty lies."

When Jonar turned to focus back on his instruments, Deen left to head towards the rear once more, kindly asking the Marine she had displaced earlier for her seat back.

She knew in her heart she wanted to be with Jonar Arik again, that she wanted things to be the way they had once been between them. She understood that it could never be like that again. Too much had happened since those seemingly simpler days. They had both changed, he perhaps more so than she had.

She hadn't given up hope however that they could still find a way to be happy together in a different way. If there was anything DeMara Deen was known for it was that no matter how bad things got, no matter how much the odds were stacked against them, she never gave up hope.

\* \* \*

"We're approaching the landing site. We'll be setting down half a klick north of the target."

Owens stepped up behind the major piloting the lead shuttle. He had exchanged his uniform for inconspicuous tactical gear along with DeMara Deen, Sharval and even Belore who had only changed out of his distinct Cardassian military armor under protest.

Looking out the windshield he frowned when he noticed that they were heading towards what looked like a small Valerian settlement. "I thought we agreed to avoid the local population."

"We are." Wasco glanced briefly over his shoulder. "According to the colonel this place has been abandoned a while ago."

Owens looked towards Sharval who confirmed this with a nod. "The inhabitants quickly realized that this place had gotten far too dangerous. Most of them moved further north."

He didn't miss the accusatory tone in her voice. They had abandoned their homes because of a war the Federation and the Dominion had brought to this world. He decided there was little point to dwell on it now. With any luck, all this would come to end in a few short hours.

Wasco set the shuttle down in the large and overgrown courtyard of what looked like an impressive stone building the size of a small country estate. There was enough room for the other shuttle to park alongside them and a number of tall trees which had obviously not been trimmed in a good while provided some cover.

Both teams disembarked and stepped onto the wet and muddy ground. The rain here was steadier than what Owens had experience on Valeria before. It didn't slow down Arik who quickly ordered his men to form a loose perimeter before he joined Wasco, Owens, Deen, Sharval and Belore assembled close to the wide stone steps leading up to the now barricaded main entrance to the house in order to plan their next move.

Wasco had produced a sturdy, combat padd which currently held a map of their surroundings. He pointed at a cluster of buildings. "We're here." The image zoomed out slightly to show a flashing red circle not too far from their current position. "We need to get here." He zoomed back in to reveal more details about the communications facility, including a small unassuming area which had been highlighted in one of the southern quadrants and at least two hundred meters from the installation proper. "This is our entry point. An emergency exit tunnel which we believe is only lightly defended."

Owens considered the map closely and didn't miss once again that the comm station wasn't located very far from the heavily defended fusion plant. This worried him as it meant that if they failed, or if something were to go wrong and they'd be detected, Lam's reinforcements could be on top of them in very little time.

Shaval indicated towards what looked like a river which ran along the settlement and all the way towards the base. "This is our best way to get there. It may not be a straight line but it is mostly dried out since they built a large damn way up river. We'll get our feet wet but the bed should keep us out of sight until we get to our destination."

Wasco looked towards the Deltan to get his opinion. "Sounds good."

"What can we expect once we're inside?" Owens glanced at the Deltan as well.

"I've been there twice before. The main control room is usually staffed by a dozen Marines and support staff but we don't need to get in there. I'm pretty certain we can access the network and upload a message from one of the auxiliary rooms which are not always manned. I can show you the way but I don't think I'll be able to run the equipment."

That's when Deen nodded. "I can probably help with that. I assume the system will be LCARS based and very similar to what we have on *Eagle*. It shouldn't be too difficult to send out a general message which will reach every Marine on this planet."

Belore frowned. "Which also means that it won't take Lam very long to figure out what's going on or where we are."

Michael looked at the Cardassian and then at the others. "We always knew this was going to be the case. This is a one-way trip. Once the message is sent and the truth is out there, Lam will no longer be in a position to escalate this conflict by convincing his troops to mount an offensive. But it will not stop him from bringing us in."

"And possibly kill us all."

Owens considered Sharval's concerned expression. "That's a probability, I can't deny that. Especially considering that he's tried that before but I cannot imagine he'll go through with it once we've been successful. He'll have nothing to gain and everything to lose by trying to get rid of us then."

"That's a big gamble."

"You don't have to come with us." He ignored her scolding look. "This isn't really your fight."

"How can you say that? This is my home."

Michael nodded. "Of course but ending this war is as little your responsibility as it was starting it. You and your people are caught in the crossfire of two powers having foolishly decided to make your planet their battlefield. It's up to us to correct our mistakes and ensure this ends here and now. It's our lives to risk, not yours."

Sharval offered him a large smile. "Oh my gallant Sky Knight, however may I repay you for such selflessness?"

Deen couldn't help herself and giggled. That was until she received an admonishing glare from her captain.

"I'm going and that's all there's to it."

Arik turned his head suddenly and stared at the gray skies above.

Deen noticed first. "What is it?"

He shook his head slightly. "That can't be. Not here."

Then Owens began to hear it too. It was a humming sound and it was steadily getting louder. "What is that?"

"Trouble." Arik turned to his men. "Hives, hives! Get to cover, now!" He whipped back around and pointed at the building. "In there!" Before anyone could even think about what was going on, he had already whipped out his rifle and blown open the barricaded doors with a well placed phaser blast.

Wasco was the first to respond and raced up the steps. Belore was next, and Owens grabbed hold of Sharval's arm as he pushed her forward. Arik took hold of Deen and within moments they were inside the old abandoned building with its squeaky floorboards and desolated interior design which still spoke of something that had been beautiful and grand once upon a time.

"Get down." Arik flattened himself onto the floor and the others quickly followed suit.

The humming had now grown so loud, it was impossible to miss, drowning out even the sound of the rain outside. Just before Michael could ask what they were up against, he felt the entire building rattle and dust and debris coming loose from the ceiling above.

He thought the worst was over but quickly realized that he was sadly mistaken. Not a moment later he felt as if they had been caught in a middle of a powerful earthquake and he buried his head under his arms to protect it.

He felt the rain again and when he looked up he realized why. Something had blown right through the roof and destroyed most of the ceiling of the three-story building. Half of it was now exposed to the elements. A dark swarm of something that looked like insects hovered just outside the massive gap.

Arik was getting back onto his feet. "Move, move, move!"

Nobody hesitated once they realized that this building was no longer a safe heaven. Arik blasted down another door and threw his shoulder at what little remained off it to break through and get them back outside.

Owens brought up his rifle and fired a couple of shots into the middle of the ominous swarm which seemed to be following them but found that it had little effect, the mass simply parted effortlessly to avoid the blasts.

"Safe your ammo." Arik threw a cylindrical device from his vest onto the ground but kept running towards a nearby building, smaller but equally abandoned.

When Michael looked back he could see that the device had thrown up an energy screen over their heads which the attacking swarm was not able to penetrate. Judging by the way the Deltan was rushing to find new cover, he assumed it was not going to be a permanent solution.

The team rushed into the second building but never stopped. Instead Arik used it merely as a waypoint. He sharply changed directions inside

and made sure the others following him were staying close and keeping his fast pace. He pointed at a barricaded window and both Wasco and Owens raised their rifles in mid-sprint to blow out its wooden boards.

Sharval dove through the window first, followed by Deen, Belore and then Owens and the two Marines.

Outside they found the husk of a large and rusted land vehicle which was missing all its large rubber tires and had become part of an overgrown garden. The Deltan indicated for them to take cover behind it.

Michael needed a brief moment to catch his breath after their sprint through two buildings. "What are those things?"

"Hives." Arik kept his eyes on the direction from which they had fled. The swam was no longer in sight but their insistent humming sound made it all too obvious that they were still close by, most likely trying to reacquire their targets.

Deen looked at him. "Did Lam find us?"

Belore shook his head. "Those are Cardassian. I've heard of those things. Hundreds of semiautonomous miniature drones which operate much like a swarm of insects. They fire microscopic antimatter projectiles which aren't particularly destructive by themselves. But you add that by a few hundred –"

Another building which had been targeted by the drone swarm crumbled to pieces just a few hundred meters from their position.

Michael got the picture. "What are the Cardassians doing so deep behind enemy lines?"

"They carry out surprise attacks from time to time. I've never seen them use hives around here before. Can't be a good sign." Arik raised his rifle, lining up a shot that wasn't really there. Then he got in touch with the rest of his men.

Wasco looked at the captain. "Perhaps the general was right and Metral is abusing the talk of a ceasefire to launch an offensive of his own."

Deen offered an alternative opinion. "Or maybe he found out Lam is getting ready for one and is taking his own steps in response."

Both possibilities sounded reasonable to Michael. "It changes nothing. We're still going through with this." He turned to look at Sharval, aiming her an insistent look. "I need you to get out of here and I'm not going to take no for an answer this time. If we don't make it, I need you to find a way to contact my ship once it returns and let them know what has happened." He removed his combadge and pressed it into the palm of her

hand. "Speak to Commander Star and tell her to do whatever it takes to stop Lam."

She glanced at the silver and gold chevron shaped pin for a moment. She smiled at him again but this time it was a little sadder than what it used to be. "Alright but I am not going to have to talk to your ship. You're going to make it through this, after all the Sky Knight always survives." She leaned towards him and pressed her lips hard against his, not caring in the slightest that they had an audience. Then she whispered in his ear. "Don't get killed." After that she was on her feet and ran without ever looking back.

Owens made sure that the hives weren't going after her and kept his eyes on Sharval until she disappeared passed a nearby tree line.

A series of explosions caused him to whip his head back around just in time to see the building in front of them fall in on itself and the swarm of tiny hives emerging from the resulting dust cloud like an unstoppable Biblical plague. Michael had no illusions that those things were much deadlier than locusts.

"Aim for the left most corner of the hive cloud. Fire on my mark." Arik wasn't the most senior officer in the group. He wasn't even the most senior Marine but nobody hesitated to follow the noncom's order and everyone raised their rifles, reading them to fire.

The hives were moving closer, apparently having relocated their target which appeared to be Owens and his team. There were no more buildings or significant obstacles in their path other than the decrepit vehicle they had sought shelter behind. Considering what they had done to solid stone buildings, Michael didn't consider their chances of surviving a direct attack to be favorable. The only thing that had stopped them before had been Arik's portable shield but he seemed to be all out of those. He wasn't sure what their phasers could do against them.

His finger rested on the trigger of his rifle regardless and even though he had an overwhelming desire to open fire in the desperate hope that it would make a difference this time, he held it in check, waiting for Arik's signal.

The humming sound was getting worse and he could feel it all the way in his bones. It was the kind of sound Michael was sure, if he survived this, he'd have nightmares of for weeks to come.

"Fire."

They unleashed their weapons as one. All but Arik.

The effect was discouraging. The entire swarm simply shifted to the right and none of their beams seemed to connect with anything but empty air.

But Arik was not deterred. "Keep firing." Then he took aim himself. But instead of adding another phaser blast to the cacophony, his weapon unleashed something akin to a grenade which he launched right into the mass off the hives. Not a second later, his grenade was joined by two more, fired from other Marines hidden within the settlement.

The drones attempted to escape again but with the steady phaser fire they didn't have many options. The grenades exploded in sequence, one after the other, and the hives were too slow to avoid the blast radius.

Most blew up right there, many others simply dropped to the ground along with the rain and disappeared somewhere beneath the mud-covered ground. The threat was neutralized.

Deen uttered a heavy sigh of relieve before she aimed Arik a grateful look. "I think I'd make a horrible Marine. My nerves simply wouldn't hold up."

But the Deltan ignored her, seemingly listening to reports from his men instead. "We've got casualties." He got up from behind their cover and rushed back towards the courtyard where they had parked their shuttles.

When Owens and the others arrived a few short moments after Arik, they already found two men down, seemingly having been badly injured when the hives had blown apart those buildings. Unable to walk, their comrades had brought them back to the courtyard and the corpsman, a corporal who himself had suffered an injury to his leg, hovered over them but seemed unable to do much besides attempting to alleviate some of their pain.

Wasco turned to the medic. "How bad is it?"

"Bad, sir. Yulec lost a lot of blood and Chernov has a bad concussion. There's very little I can do for them here."

"The closest hospital is in the capital." Arik glanced at the major, awaiting his orders. Of course it wasn't difficult to know what he was thinking. That the longer they hesitated to get these men medical assistance the greater the chance they would not survive their injuries.

"Not a good idea. Somebody is bound to ask questions there and Lam will find out what we're up to." Belore crossed his arms in front of his chest. "We cannot afford that."

"I'm not about to let my people die because of this foolhardy plan of yours which as far as I'm concerned is already FUBAR."

Deen took a step towards Arik. "Nobody is saying that, Jonar."

But even her calming aura seemed to have a very limited effect on the Deltan at the moment and he glanced back at the Cardassian. "I think I have a good idea what he's saying, Dee."

Belore looked unapologetic. "We're trying to end a war here and save thousands of souls. A few sacrifices along the way will be unavoidable."

"Especially if they are Starfleet Marines, right?"

"Stand down, Sergeant."

Arik kept his baleful eyes on Belore only a moment longer before glancing at Wasco. "Sir, with all due respect, I can't just stand here and let my people die."

The major nodded and then glanced at Owens. He didn't have to say it but it was clear he agreed with the sergeant.

Michael kept his eyes on the two Marines on the ground, a spotted Kriosian woman and a brunette human man, both writhing in pain, both in desperate need of medical attention. He could feel the eyes of the others upon him. Then he looked at the corpsman. "Can you fly the shuttle?"

"Yes, sir."

He looked back at Wasco, giving him a nod.

The major understood. "Let's load these people on the second shuttle. Corporal, you'll pilot it to the hospital in the capital. If anyone asks, you were ambushed by Cardassian hives on a routine recon patrol. You will not tell anyone about us or our mission."

He nodded sharply before he helped the others move the injured Marines.

Belore refused to help and shook his head instead. "This is a mistake."

Deen shot him a glare. "But they'll live."

"I hope that will be some comfort to you, Lieutenant, when we fail in our mission and as a consequence doom thousands more to die."

Owens had heard enough. "All it means is that we have a little less time to pull this off but that doesn't mean we're not going to. Let's get moving. Time is a factor and we've got no more of it to waste."

They set out before the shuttle had even lifted off, already down three men, they double timed it towards the dried out riverbed which would lead them to their destination. Regardless of the confidence he had

displayed, Owens couldn't entirely help but dread that perhaps Belore had been right after all and that he had just doomed their mission to end this war before countless additional victims could be added to its growing tally of casualties.

Two twin lances of super-charged azure energy shot across the void of space and Star could do nothing but hang on for dear life as they struck the unprotected and utterly unprepared *Sacajawea* dead on.

She gritted her teeth so hard it hurt just before she felt the deck under her feet suddenly give way and she was slammed into the bulkhead with such force, she was sure she had dislocated parts of her body.

During her short time as *Sacajawea's* captain she had only been involved in hostile situations twice and only once had her ship taken any damage which had waylaid them for a few hours. She immediately knew that this was far worse than anything she had ever experienced while serving on this ship. Perhaps even worse than anything she had experienced on *Eagle* during the war.

The deck still swayed as she made it slowly back onto her feet even while seemingly every bone in her body protested this move. She glanced towards the status display at the back of the bridge to get an idea of the damage that had been done but then realized that the display had been blown apart in the fire fight earlier and now lay in shambles. An example *Sacajawea* would be following soon enough if they didn't act quickly.

She found Alendra picking herself up from the floor but not nearly quickly enough. Bluish blood trickling down her forehead from a nasty gash that she had suffered. Star reached out for her arm and helped her along, practically pushing her back into the seat. There was no time to consider her injuries, the stakes had become the life or death of over two-hundred crewmembers. "Evasive actions, Lieutenant. Now."

She didn't wait for a reply but turned to look towards the tactical station where she found Leva crawling back into a chair. "Shields?"

He shook his head. "That hit just blew up the entire grid. I may be able to get a couple of phasers back online but it won't be much."

Star heard a small chuckle which quickly turned into a laugh and she whipped around to spot Mahoney on the floor, sitting up against the railing surrounding the command area. He was nursing a broken or bruised arm. "You doomed us all. We're all going to die."

She skewered him with a murderous glare. "Evan, I'm only going to say this one more time. Shut the hell up or I'll swear I'll shoot you myself."

It didn't stop his entirely inappropriate amusement but at least he offered no other comments.

She ignored him and looked at the screen. *Eagle* had intercepted the two Thulian ships and appeared to be doing a decent job of trying to keep them occupied. "Star to Xylion. Status?"

The Vulcan's voice coming over the speakers was laced with distracting static, most likely a sign that *Sacajawea's* comm systems had taken damage as well. "*We have engaged the Thulian vessels, Commander.*" There was a short pause and she could hear the telltale sounds of battle coming from *Eagle's* bridge as the Thulians were now targeting the larger Starfleet ship. Xylion issued a few orders, calm as always, before he spoke to Star again. "*However I am unable to guarantee that we will be successful in keeping both ships sufficiently distracted to avoid either one engaging Sacajawea again. I suggest you consider a tactical retreat.*"

It was an option of course but she hated the idea of leaving *Eagle* to handle both those ship's on her own.

Leva flung his head around. "Incoming torpedoes."

Star saw it too. One of the Thulian ships had managed to launch at least a handful of projectiles and the bright amber lights were racing right towards them.

"Lieutenant, emergency evasive."

"Unable, sir. Engines are not responding quickly enough."

"Brace!" Once again she could do nothing but hold on and hope for the best as her fingers dug into the back of the empty captain's chair.

She managed to keep on her feet this time but only barely. Judging by the way the deck plates trembled underneath her boots, they were trying to pull themselves apart. The hit had caused significant damage to the ship's superstructure.

"Hull breaches on deck twelve, thirteen, fourteen..." Leva stopped himself. "Multiple decks all across the ships. Emergency force fields are struggling to maintain integrity."

Star realized that Xylion had been right. They had to get out of here. "Bridge to engineering. We need warp speed right now."

A young, harried voice responded, trying to make himself heard over the noise of what sounded like an engine room falling to pieces around him. "*This is Hendricks. Engines are gone. I had to shut down the core after that hit in order to prevent a breach. Impulse is offline, too. I'm not sure what I can do down here. Maybe I can scrounge up enough power for a few phaser blasts.*"

Before Star could respond she caught another glimpse of the screen. The emerald and azure moon was becoming far too prominent, *Sacajawea* was dropping out of orbit. "Lieutenant, check your altitude and pull her up."

But the Bolian woman shook her head with barely contained frustration. "Helm is no longer responding, sir. I'm losing control."

Her eyes widened. *Sacajawea* was now caught in a death spiral towards the surface of the moon without any chance of escape. A dark thought crossed her mind then. A few days earlier, before this insanity had even gotten underway, she had fatefully fantasized for a brief moment that her former ship was forever lost before she even had a chance to come to her rescue. In a twisted and perverse form of wish fulfillment, it now appeared as if exactly that was going to happen. She wondered if it was poetic justice that the ship would perish with her still onboard.

"Sir, what do you want me to do?" Hendricks was still waiting for instructions down in engineering.

Star shook her morose thoughts free of her mind. Maybe she'd die on this cursed ship but she was determined that nobody else deserved this fate. "Forget the phasers. I want you to channel whatever energy we've got left to thrusters."

Alendra turned her head to glance at Star. "It won't be enough to arrest our descent."

"Perhaps not but it might slow us down." Star considered for a moment that perhaps *Eagle* could come to their rescue but quickly dismissed this notion. She had her hands full with those two warships and wouldn't be able to risk lowering her shields or attempting to lasso in the plunging *Sacajawea* with a tractor beam. She knew Xylion well enough by now to realize that, like most Vulcans, nine times out of ten, he would choose to protect the many over the few. And right now that meant *Eagle*. She didn't blame him; it was the right thing to do. "Hendricks, make it happen and then evacuate engineering. We're abandoning ship. Bridge out."

This caused everyone around her to turn and look at her in surprise. Even if it was becoming rapidly obvious that it was their last chance to come out of this alive, it was never easy to abandon a ship to its fate.

Mahoney had managed to pull himself on his feet again, holding on the railing. "No. We're not abandoning this ship. I am the captain and I order you—"

Star was on him in a heartbeat and without thinking twice she brought up her balled fist and socked him right in the face, not caring that she had done so with her right arm, the one which had been replaced with a cybernetic construct years ago. She hardly felt a thing but Mahoney was out cold before he even flopped back to the floor. "I told you to shut up." She couldn't quite believe how good that had felt.

Leva looked at her with a raised eyebrow, making him look uncannily Vulcan. Then he toggled the internal comm. "All hands, this is Commander Leva. Abandon ship. I say again, abandon ship." What followed was an insistent computer announcement and a blaring siren to make sure every last crewmember got the message and was headed without further delay to the nearest escape pod.

The problem as far as the bridge was concerned, was the fact that it was still littered with far too many unconscious bodies and Star did the math in her head. There were more people than could fit into the escape pods on this deck. She glanced at her remaining security team. "Start moving these people into the nearest pods. Do it now."

They didn't hesitate.

She glanced back at the helm. "How much time, Lieutenant?"

"We have maybe six minutes until atmospheric conditions will tear apart the hull and escape pods will not survive the launch. Even with minimal thrusters I'm not able to readjust our entry angle to avoid catastrophic damage."

Star nodded and then tapped her on the shoulder. "Understood. Help get those people into the escape pods and then get on one yourself."

The Bolian stood and followed the order without question.

Star considered taking the helm herself for a moment but then realized there was nothing more to be done there. The ship was locked in on an irreversible course to burn up in Mittias IIIb's atmosphere. So instead she turned around and helped the others get the unconscious men and women off the bridge, knowing full well that any second had become valuable.

And just when she thought that maybe they might come out of this thing in one piece, with the bridge nearly completely evacuated and most escape pods already launched, she heard another ominous warning sound coming from the tactical station.

Leva got there first. "We've got another incoming torpedo."

She glanced at the screen which had shifted to show a single glowing projectile racing towards them. She had little doubt that it would finish them off for good; destroy them before they even had a chance to be crushed by their uncontrolled plunge towards the unforgiving atmosphere below. She wasn't sure if it was meant as an act of mercy or if the Thulians just really wanted them dead. It didn't matter.

"Let's go!" She grabbed Mahoney who was one of few remaining officers left on the bridge by the arm even while he was slowly coming back around. Her mind tried to convince her that it was a futile effort, that she couldn't possibly outrun a torpedo and get to an escape pod below decks before it struck the ship, and yet at the same time her gut insisted that she'd never give up.

She looked up at Leva and his Bolian lieutenant, who besides her and Mahoney were the last two people on the bridge, waiting by the open turbolift doors and spurring her on. Star decided to listen to her gut.

Mahoney had other ideas. He pushed away from her suddenly. "No, no, I won't do it, I won't come with you. I won't give you the satisfaction of rescuing me."

Star couldn't believe it. She was half of a mind to just let him stay but she couldn't quite do it. Not because he was worth rescuing, she was convinced he wasn't, but because she didn't want him to take the easy way out. She wanted him to be accountable for everything he had done. She wanted the satisfaction of seeing him behind bars. Who knew, the way things were going she might even join him. "Shut up and come along or I'll knock you on your ass again." She reached out for him once more, getting a firm grasp of his arm and she dragged him along even as he fought her all the way.

She had nearly reached the turbolift when she couldn't help herself and glance back towards the screen one last time—and immediately wished she hadn't.

With a searing flash the torpedo seemed to strike the viewer itself. The entire forward section of the bridge tore away, exposing them to the vacuum of space. For a millisecond or so, Star had a flashback to the very incident which had brought her such disgrace, which had cost her not just half an arm but so much more.

The temperature plummeted in seconds and a pull of unimaginable force ripped her off her feet and towards certain death. Somehow, she couldn't explain exactly how, she managed to grab hold of the armrest of

the captain's chair as she flew passed it. Judging by the pain shooting through her body she was certain she had dislocated her arm in the process. Hanging there, suspended in the middle of the bridge, she turned to see that she still had hold of Mahoney with her other hand. It was only thanks to the strength of her artificial limb that she managed to cling to the seat but the additional weight was already causing her to start to slip.

She looked back the other way to find the turbolift, perhaps twenty feet away. It might as well have been twenty light-years. There was no chance she could reach it with the entire force of space pulling at her.

With some relief she spotted that Leva had managed to hang on inside the lift car. The Bolian hadn't been so lucky but the half Romulan had managed to snag her up at the last moment and with his impressive strength pulled her slowly inside the turbolift. Then he glanced up at Star, as if trying to figure out a way to reach her as well. They both knew the gap between them was insurmountable.

Star mouthed a single word. 'Go.'

Leva exchanged one last, meaningful look with her. Perhaps to let her know that it had been an honor to serve with her. Then the turbolift doors closed shut and Star prayed it would take them both to safety before it was too late.

She knew it was for her.

Mahoney it seemed was not willing to go quietly. Fueled with the adrenaline of his hatred for her, he inexplicably managed to find purchase by grabbing hold of her uniform and pulled himself up along her body. The freezing cold drained all the color from his face but he still managed to bring it close to her ear. When he spoke, he did so with some difficulty. "This is how it ends for you, Taz. Don't ... fight it. It's better than what you deserve." He jerked hard at the back collar of her uniform, determined to pull her free. "Time for you to get off my ship."

She moved her free hand towards her chest even if every little movement caused white fiery lances of pain to shoot through her body. "As you keep reminding me, you're the captain now. And the captain goes down with the ship." It didn't take much effort to loosen the fasteners on her jacket. The material gave way instantly, slipping off her and then ripping away with him still holding on to it.

She heard a surprised little gasp which turned out to be the last thing that came over Evan Mahoney's lips before he was blown out into space. She looked after him, seeing his body tumbling towards the surface below

and with some satisfaction imagined that he would spent his last thoughts cursing her before his body burned up in the atmosphere.

She had no doubts that she would follow him shortly. She had cheated death far too many times over the years.

Fed up with his past failures, the Grim Reaper had finally come to even the score and catch up with Tazla Star for good.

"I have the shot, Gunny."

Owens watched the Deltan sergeant nod in acknowledgement towards Corporal Alessandro Rossini, one of the snipers in his team, but otherwise give no other orders.

Three more Marines had also lined up shots while they were hiding themselves in the underbrush near the riverbed which as Sharval had correctly advised had led them within only a few hundred meters of their target. All four snipers were standing by to take down the only Marines currently guarding the service tunnel which Wasco had identified as their ingress into the comm facility.

Arik's hesitation was costing them time they didn't have. "Do it." Owens whispered urgently and then brought up his binoculars to watch their unaware targets.

The Deltan finally gave the go ahead.

"This feels all kinds of wrong." But Rossini followed the order anyway and so did his fellow Marines as four suppressed and barely visible phaser blasts rang out at nearly the exact same time.

Their aim was true and all four guards crumbled to the ground, stunned.

Wasco waited ten more seconds, probably to make sure the assault had gone unnoticed and then was the first one to stand and lead the rest of the team down a slight rise and towards the tunnel entrance. The actual station had been built into a mountain rising just behind it. A few well-concealed comm relays peaked out from it at various locations as the only indication of what lay inside.

Upon reaching the tunnel entrance, the Marines somewhat reluctantly secured their fellow men, the ones they had just shot. Wasco headed for a panel close to the dark and heavy blast door which functioned as the only entrance to the tunnel and opened it to reveal a simple console behind it. "Now let's hope Svea's intel was correct." He began to input codes into the console.

Belore stepped up close to him. "What happens if it is not?"

"Every single alarm in this building will go off and we'll have half a Marine battalion surround us within twenty seconds."

“That would have been a long trip for nothing then.”

Owens held his breath as he watched Wasco work, fully understanding that their entire plan now rested on the codes van der Meer had provided them to gain access to this facility.

The Cardassian shook his head. “This is taking too long.” He turned to look at Owens. “What if she sold us out to Lam?”

The thought had crossed his mind as well. After all she might have only gone along with his plan to humor them but never truly considered helping them at all. Perhaps this was all just some sort of scheme to deliver them back into Lam’s waiting hands. Sure, she was a close friend of Wasco’s but Lam was her superior and Marines were always supposed to follow orders, put them above all other considerations.

Then the blast door began to rise and the major turned to face Belore. “You were saying?” A little self-satisfying smirk played on his face. A rare sight for him. “A Marine always keeps his word.”

“You mean like your glorious general?”

Owens quickly inserted himself. There was no time for another argument, not here. “Alright, let’s go.”

Wasco shot the man a brief glare before he nodded towards Arik. “Gunnery Sergeant, take point.”

The Deltan carefully stepped into the facility with his phaser rifle sweeping the tunnel but finding nothing to hinder their progress or offer opposition.

The others followed.

“Those guards checked in only a few seconds before we took them down. Which means we have about thirty minutes until their next report is due.” Wasco walked at Owens’ side as they slowly made their way through the narrow and mostly featureless tunnel.

“Enough time to get our message out. What about internal sensors?”

“Svea’s access code should have overridden all security systems. All we have to worry about are a few guards or staff members crossing our path.”

After a hundred meters they reached another blast door. There was just enough room for the ten of them to stack up at either side and hide out of sight.

Wasco nodded for Owens to activate the door which lifted slowly. Wasco and Arik, lying prone on the floor, fired two shots as soon as the gap had been wide enough. Once the door had fully risen, Michael spotted

two more guards who had sagged to the floor and now unconsciously sat up against the walls.

The Marines secured these two as well.

The corridor beyond the tunnel was much wider but also far more utilitarian than what he was used to from *Eagle* or even van der Meer's base. The floors were covered with simple metallic grates and EPS power lines and ODN conduits were running naked along the walls and ceilings.

Wasco referred back to his padd which now contained a blueprint of the station. He indicated down the corridor. "The nearest auxiliary comm room is fifty meters down this corridor, left at a junction, third door."

Michael nodded and glanced back at Arik. "Lead the way."

They had to move slowly, doing their best to cause as little sound as possible which wasn't easy without any real floor coverings to muffle their steps. When they approached the junction the Marines once again carefully pressed themselves against the walls. Their caution turned out to be unnecessary as all the corridors were clear.

Owens spotted the door leading to their destination and this time was the first one inside, rifle held at the ready.

A young technician was the single occupant, sitting at the main console and swiveling his chair around upon hearing the doors behind him opening. His eyes grew wide but he had no chance to react in any other manner to this unexpected intrusion as Owens had already stunned him, causing the man to slump over the console.

The rest of the team rushed into the room to secure it.

Two Marines gently removed the technician from the chair to allow Deen access. She put down her rifle and took the seat, quickly getting to work. A smile began to spread over her lips. "This looks promising. I think I can gain access to the comm network from here. We might even be able to push a signal as far as Cardassian territory."

Owens stood next to her. "Can we reach the ship?"

She shook her head. "Perhaps but I would have to reconfigure the relays. I don't think we have the time for that."

"This might be faster."

Michael turned towards Wasco who was removing a portable comm unit from an equipment bay.

"These should be powerful enough to reach orbit."

Owens nodded. "Give it a try." But he left Wasco to his own, for now his priority had to be to send out a message which would make it

unmistakably clear to every last Marine on this planet that they were fighting a pointless war, one which's outcome had already been decided over a week ago.

"Alright, I think everything's set up." Deen glanced back at him and then pointed at a visual sensor to her left. "You can record your message there. Once complete I can send it out on a level one priority using the station's relay network. In theory that will override all other signals and reach every station and personal comm in range." She slipped a green isolinear chip into an appropriate slot. "Lastly I attach the official Starfleet orders and documents to the message and even the most loyal Marine would have to think twice if they are doing the right thing here."

Belore crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Don't underestimate years of indoctrination, Lieutenant."

"We aren't Cardassian soldiers." Wasco said, looking up from working on the mobile comm unit. "Don't underestimate our ability to see reason."

"After all I've seen here, I still have to be convinced of that."

Both Wasco and Arik appeared ready to shoot back a response, the scolding look in their eyes seemed to imply however that they felt no obligation whatsoever to convince Belore or any Cardassian for that matter of anything at all.

Owens beat them both to it. "I think we've already seen a number of Marines who have been willing to stand up for what is right." He considered both Wasco and the Deltan, even if Arik hadn't appeared particularly confident in their plan, perhaps even hesitant. "Now it's time to make sure the rest will follow their lead."

Deen offered him a nod. "Ready whenever you are."

Owens stepped up to the visual sensor without further delay and took a deep breath. It wasn't very often he had to give a speech which could decide between war and peace. This was a task usually left to politicians and diplomats. With none of their ilk anywhere near Valeria, he understood this burden now rested solely on his shoulders.

He activated the recording, a blinking light on the console confirming it was running. "My name is Michael Owens, captain of the Starfleet starship *USS Eagle*. I have come to Valeria on direct orders from Starfleet Command to advise Starfleet forces stationed on this world that the Dominion has been defeated following their unconditional surrender at Cardassia Prime. The Treaty of Bajor which has been signed by all

belligerent parties stipulates an end to all hostilities between the forces of the Federation Alliance and those of the Dominion, including the Cardassians and the Breen. As part of the treaty, the Federation Alliance has been placed into temporary control of Cardassia to ensure a smooth transition to a new civilian government and to better assist the Cardassian people following the heavy losses they have incurred during the conflict.

By the order of the Federation Council, all Starfleet and Cardassian forces on Valeria are to immediately stand down from any combat actions and prepare to be transported back to Federation and Cardassian space.”

He paused for a moment, realizing he needed to strike a more personal tone if he wanted to get through to his audience. “I will not pretend to know the pain and sacrifices both Marines and Cardassian forces have endured while fighting over this world for the last two years. But like most everyone else fighting this war, I too have lost friends and colleagues very dear to me. But the time for fighting is now over and we all need to pull together to heal, mourn and rebuilt that which has been lost. Both the Federation and Cardassia have paid dearly in lives and property and it is now our combined task to help those most affected, the millions of people on both sides who have lost so much. Now that the war has been fought, our next duty is just as important and challenging. It’s the battle for peace and our struggle to rebuild our lives and those of the countless people needing our help back home.

We must also honor the wishes of the people of Valeria and their sovereign leaders, who have been caught in the middle of a war not of their making, and promptly withdraw all of our troops from their territory so they, too, may begin to recover from what has been a most disturbing and traumatic experience for them.

I have attached to this message, the Dominion Surrender Declaration, the Treaty of Bajor, orders from the Federation Council and the President and the interim leaders of the Cardassian Union as well as the signed declarations from the chief magistrates of the Valerian territories which are available to review for anyone who wishes to do so.

The war is over and all of you, Marines and Cardassians alike, are desperately needed to come home where your next great challenge awaits you.”

He kept his steely focus on the visual pickup a moment longer and then deactivated the recording. When he turned around he could see that every single person in the room was now looking his way with something

akin to relieve mirrored on their faces. Owens wasn't sure if his message was going to be enough to convince Lam and his men to stand down but he knew, at the very least, he had won over this room. Deen, Wasco, Belore and even Jonar Arik offered him curt nods to prove it.

He glanced at the Tenarian.

"Just give me a second and I'll have that broadcasted around the globe." She offered him a little smirk. "You're going to be a real celebrity. A true Sky Knight." She added that last bit with a mischievous little smirk.

Owens frowned at that. Bad enough Sharval had thrown that term into his face every chance she'd been given, he really didn't need it to catch on. "Just what I always dreamed of." He looked passed her and glanced toward Wasco. "Any luck reaching the ship?"

He shook his head. "Afraid not. And I rather not risk boosting the signal too much. It might invite unwanted attention."

"It's possible *Eagle* hasn't returned yet."

A quiet curse uttered by Deen caused Owens to redirect his attention her way. It was a bad sign, he could not recall the last time she had used that kind of language.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head as her hands danced frantically across the console. "I'm not sure but I'm having a real problem getting the signal out. It's the comm relays. They looked just fine a moment ago but now..."

Owens placed his hands on the console and leaned in closer to get a look himself. "Now what?"

Deen glanced up at him with a worried expression. "They're shutting down. All of them."

"I knew getting in here was far too easy. This is a trap." Belore shot Wasco a deathly glare. "Your friend the colonel betrayed us."

The major shook his head. "I don't believe that."

"Of course you don't. Because a Marine always keeps his word, right? Wake up, Major. She never meant to help us."

Owens had to admit that it was a possibility but for now he chose to believe another one. "Lam isn't stupid. Once he realized we had not been apprehended, he may have guessed that this might be our destination and took precautions."

Deen nodded along slowly. "That makes sense. The relays could have been programmed to shut down as soon as anyone tried to send a general broadcast. And judging by the fact that we haven't been

apprehended yet, Lam may just have been careful but not knowing for certain we'd come here."

Arik took a step closer. "I take it he knows now?"

She nodded. "I say that's a good bet."

Owens understood. There was still a chance even if the odds were most likely no longer in their favor. If they ever had been to begin with. He pointed at the portable comm unit. "Take that. We need to get out of here now."

Seconds later the team was on the move again, rushing out of the room and retracing their steps.

"What's the plan now?"

Owens glanced at Deen even as they were making their way down the corridor. It was an excellent question. The truth was they had run so low on options to begin with, there hadn't really been a backup plan. He didn't get much of a chance to think about one either.

"Contacts."

The Marine had hardly spoken the words when a handful of Lam's men appeared further down the corridor, just beyond the junction that would lead them back towards the tunnel and the exit. All of them had their weapons up and fired the moment they had a clear shot.

It had been a bad idea. A number of blasts slammed into the walls and the unprotected conduits running along them. A couple of EPS lines ripped apart, showering everyone with red hot sparks. The corridor quickly filled with heated steam of escaping electroplasma.

The thickening smoke reduced the visibility drastically and caused enough of a distraction for the team to reach the junction unharmed.

Arik pointed at two of his men. "Cover our escape. Fifteen seconds, stun grenades then go."

They nodded and followed the order while Arik indicated for the rest of the team to keep rushing towards the tunnel.

But they didn't get very far until they heard the explosion behind them.

When Owens whipped around he could see that a fire had erupted by the junction, most likely the assaulting Marines had used a grenade of their own before Arik's men had the chance. One of them, Owens believed it was Rossini had been thrown to the floor where he was stirring slightly. The other Marine was conscious but clearly dazed.

Arik stopped as he looked back towards the junction.

Wasco shot the man an instant glance. "We have to get out of here, Sergeant."

But Arik shook his head. "We're not leaving anyone behind."

Owens could see the looks being exchanged between the two men and they seemed to arrive at an unspoken agreement. Then Arik turned back towards the junction.

"Jonar?" Deen tried to follow him but Wasco grabbed hold of her arm, shaking his head. "We need to get out of here now."

Owens nodded. He could understand and appreciate their ethos but the truth was he could not risk for them to get captured again. There was still a chance to achieve his mission, to end this war, even if it was becoming more unlikely with each passing second. But as long as there was a chance, he had to do whatever he could to keep going. "Dee, let's go."

But she kept her eyes on Arik instead who had since found his way back to the junction. He helped Rossini onto his feet and found the other Marine still able to walk. He made sure they were able to support each other and sent them on their way to rejoin the rest of the team before he grabbed a stun grenade and tossed it around the corner.

He was just turning back around to face them when an errant phaser blast blew passed him, missing him by inches.

His relief was short-lived. The beam had ignited an exposed plasma conduit.

Arik, understanding the danger, turned and began to run down the corridor.

He wasn't fast enough. The conduit exploded and the shockwave ripped him off his feet and he smashed hard into the wall.

"Jonar!" Deen freed herself from Wasco still holding on to her and rushed towards the fallen Deltan.

Belore shook his head angrily. "We don't have time for this."

Owens knew he was right. "Wasco, get these people out of here." He said just before he rushed after Deen.

He found her kneeling over Arik's body, carefully rolling him onto his back. Blood was pouring out of his nose and mouth. She reached for his neck and when she sensed Owens above her she looked up with teary eyes. "He's alive but barely. We ... we can't leave him."

Owens nodded. "Help me pick him up."

Together they got the Marine off the floor and dragged him between them down the corridor.

Wasco joined them shortly after.

Owens glared at him. "I told you to get the others out, Major."

"Arik was right, we don't leave our own behind." He didn't hesitate to help them carry the injured Marine, allowing them to adopt a faster pace towards the exit. "Besides, Nora'd kill me if anything happened to you on my watch. She was very clear about that."

Michael allowed himself a tiny smirk. He had no doubt she had been.

The stun grenade Arik had managed to deploy before he had been injured along with the plasma explosion had apparently done the trick as they were not being followed and they managed to clear the tunnel without further incident. Once outside they caught up with Belore and the remaining Marines again.

"Where to now?" The Cardassian looked impatient, clearly not happy that Owens and the others had risked the mission for the Deltan.

"The way we came. Back to the shuttle." Michael handed Arik over to some of his fellow Marines. They had already lost their corpsman so he wasn't sure what they could do for him. Deen refused to leave his side.

"And then what, Captain?"

Owens aimed a poisonous glare at the Cardassian. "I haven't thought that far ahead yet, alright?" He hadn't meant to snap at Belore. Owens liked to think of himself as a man who remained cool under pressure, had to be as a starship captain responsible for hundreds of people under his command. But the truth was that the burden of being responsible for trying to stop an entire war was getting to him. Thankfully he relocated his poise quickly enough. "Let's just get back to the shuttle. I'm sure we figure something out."

"That may no longer be an option."

Owens glanced at Wasco who was brining up his rifle again. A moment later he realized why. A Marine shuttle was quickly approaching their position and it was definitely not one of theirs, it had the wrong markings. It set down a few hundred meters form the tunnel entrance and two-dozen Marines emerged from it, promptly taking aim at Owens and his men.

Michael looked over what was left of their team. Arik was down and two more of his men were in no condition for a fight while Deen and another Marine attempted to tend to his injuries. It left them severely outmanned and outgunned. And yet it didn't stop the remaining men to pick up their weapons and drawing beads on the approaching opposition.

He noticed the fire in their eyes which spoke of iron-clad determination. They may have been hesitant to having to fight their own people when all this had first began, but they were firmly on his side now. On the side of peace, Owens decided.

Unfortunately for them, Lam's men were equally prepared to stop what in their eyes was a rebellion against their general and perhaps even against their corps itself. An unspeakable crime as far as a Marine was concerned.

As he brought up his rifle to defend himself, Owens couldn't stop himself from considering that perhaps surrender was his only remaining option. There was no way he could imagine coming out of this skirmish as the victor and perhaps there still was a chance to appeal to Lam directly and to reason with him. If he had won over the men surrounding him now, perhaps Lam could also be swayed. If they survived long enough to face him again. He knew there was no guarantee of this, not even if he decided to surrender.

A loud rumbling noise interrupted his line of thought and it even caught the approaching Marines by surprise. Still a good hundred meters away, they stopped to look towards the tree line from which the sound seemed to be originating from.

A number of smaller trees snapped like twigs as a massive ground vehicle emerged, bouncing as it rolled easily over trees and rocks alike thanks to its four thick and man-high rubber tires. Owens recognized the design of the brown, bullet shaped vehicle. It was clearly Valerian, except much larger than anything he had seen before. The behemoth even dwarfed the Marine shuttles.

The vehicle rolled to a stop immediately in front of Owens and his team and effectively blocking the approaching Marines from getting a clear shot at them.

A smirking Sharval stuck out her head from a small window in the cockpit at the front of the vehicle. "I thought you might need a lift."

Owens frowned at her. "And I thought I'd told you to stay out of this."

She regarded him with a puzzled look. "Really? That's your response to my gracious offer?" She ducked back inside. "I guess I can always take my tank somewhere else."

He couldn't help but smirk at her pouting face and her mock annoyance. Then he gestured to his team. "Alright, people, let's saddle up."

The side door to the tank slid open and four Valerian security officers stepped outside. Two of which helped with the injured while the two others moved up to the edge of the vehicle to return fire at the Marines who had since decided that this tank which had appeared so suddenly was a legitimate target.

The sturdy vehicle however was providing ample cover to allow Owens and his team to board it and within moments everyone was securely inside.

But regardless of its tough design, Owens could feel it wouldn't hold up forever, especially since the Marines had increased the power to their weapons, causing the tank to tremble dangerously. "Let's go, go go!" He made his way into the compact cockpit at the front, having to climb a short ladder in order to reach it.

Sharval had the vehicle back in motion by the time he got to her and she threw him another large smile. "You didn't really think I'd just abandon you out here, did you?"

He had to hang on tightly to the handholds fixed to the low ceiling as the tank rumbled across the land, clearly inertial dampeners not a design feature. "I thought I was supposed to be the Sky Knight. Instead it looks as if you have saved me at least twice since I've got here. Perhaps that title would be much more suitable for you."

Her smile didn't vanish as she turned back towards the controls. But she shook her head slightly. "I believe you fundamentally misunderstand the legend of the Sky Knight, the Land Maiden and the Ancient Enemy."

Before Owens could inquire about this further, he could spot more trouble heading their way. Two additional shuttles were approaching them, determined to cut off the tank. And they wasted little time, firing their phasers, one of which struck its hull, the force of the impact nearly throwing the vehicle on its side. Instead it balanced perilously on only two wheels for a moment and once more forcing Owens to battle gravity.

"Hang on!" Sharval counter-steered carefully and with a heavy bounce the massive tank landed on all four wheels again. Then she turned sharply and the behemoth blazed into a forest at full speed.

Owens hung on to dear life, hoping that the men in the back had been able to securely strap themselves in before this mad dash had commenced.

“As far as me saving the gallant Sky Knight again, I really do hope that you’re cooking up one of those ingenious plans in that brilliant Starfleet mind of yours. Otherwise this is going to be one of the shortest rescue attempts in recorded Valerian history.”

Owens glanced out of the windshield and knew exactly what she was talking about. Another two shuttles had appeared overhead as Lam was clearly done taking any chances and was throwing at them everything he had. Sharval had been forced to make another sharp turn and too late did she realize where it was taking them.

They were heading right for the very same ridge which they had visited a day earlier and beyond which Lam’s fusion generator sat at the bottom of the valley. Owens understood that the tank was far too large and heavy to survive going over that cliff. Sharval would be forced to hit the breaks and after that there were very few places to go.

He also understood something else. Even the most brilliant minds in Starfleet—and he freely admitted his one wasn’t one of those—had its limitations.

It wasn't her duranium composite artificial limb, clinging to the back of the seat which gave way first. It was the captain's chair itself which betrayed her when it snapped free from the deck suddenly, surrendering to the pull of the vacuum combined with Tazla Star's weight.

She had only a brief moment to consider the beautiful irony of it all before she got sucked out into space and freeze to death. Halfway there already, her entire body shivered and her lungs burned from the lack of oxygen.

Star was convinced this wasn't going to be a pretty death but then again perhaps there was no such thing. She closed her eyes as she surrendered herself to forces entirely outside of her control.

The impact was sudden and painful. And yet not as painful as she had expected. In fact she hadn't expected any kind of impact at all.

It took her mind a moment to realize that she had not been blown out of the bridge. Instead the emergency force field has snapped into place just in time to keep her from the unforgiving void. Gravity took hold of her not a second later and she was unceremoniously dumped onto the deck.

Her body was stiff from the cold and pain and yet she had the wherewithal to quickly roll to her side when the now loose center chair which had followed her path precisely came close to crashing down on top of her. Instead it smashed onto the floor just inches to her right.

She looked at it wide-eyed. Survived, but coming within a hair's length of getting crushed by the captain's chair. The ironies just kept coming.

Star couldn't help herself but break out into unabashed laughter once her lungs had filled with air again, even if it came over her lips more like raspy coughs. It hurt so much that it brought tears to her eyes and yet she couldn't stop herself. Perhaps it was the lack of oxygen, perhaps she was slowly going mad. She didn't know how many more times she would be able to cheat death but she was fairly certain that psychologically speaking she couldn't handle many more such scenarios.

She glanced back towards the force field which flickered dangerously as if it may give up containing the bridge's precious atmosphere at any

moment and spotted the flames starting to lick at the hull just beyond it. She understood that she wasn't out of the woods yet.

She pushed herself onto her feet, every muscle in her body protesting with vicious pain and greedily took big gulps of air which the life support system had pumped back onto the bridge. It was still freezing cold and it didn't help matters that her jacket had been ripped off of her and was now floating somewhere in outer space. Only a single sleeve of the garment remained which she quickly shook off.

"Computer." Her voice was coarse and she could hardly even hear her own voice, either because the words didn't vocalize loudly enough or because she had lost most of her hearing, she wasn't sure. "Computer, how long to the hard deck?"

*"Three minutes, twenty-four seconds. Immediate evacuation is recommended."*

"You don't say." She stumbled towards the forward turbolift, trying to will herself to move faster but her legs were still stiff as wood and refused her commands. "Computer, how many people are still on the *Sacajawea*?"

*"There are two remaining life signs on this vessel."*

At least that was good news. She was one of those which meant only a single crewmember was still on board who had not yet reached an escape pod for whatever reason.

To her relief the turbolift doors opened without hesitation and she limped inside. "What is the location of the other lifesign?"

*"Deck six, section forty-four baker."*

*"Take me there."*

The turbolift set in motion.

She tried to remember the layout of that deck and was fairly certain it still retained a number of escape pods. If nothing else, Starfleet ships like the *Sacajawea* were built with redundancy in mind. The ship may have only had a crew of two hundred but she carried enough escape pods to serve ten times that many people. Finding one shouldn't have been difficult even after the ship had been fully evacuated.

She kept stretching her limbs while the lift was racing through the ship, managing to increase her range of movement slowly even if she had to fight through miserable pain in the process.

The turbolift deposited her as closely as possible to her destination and she set out as soon as the doors opened, still unable to run, she could manage at least a slow jog.

Much of deck six had taken significant damage and a number of bulkheads had been ripped open, spewing forth thick smoke some of which Star thought had to be toxic considering the acidic taste it left in her mouth. It was a wonder anyone had made it off that deck at all.

A number of collapsed support struts hindered her progress once she came close to the section the computer had pointed her to and she had to climb over at least a couple of them, careful not to touch the super heated surfaces.

Then she heard the subdued moaning.

The man was pinned underneath a support strut, part of which seemed to rest on his right upper leg. He seemed to be in pain but otherwise conscious.

Tazla Star didn't know the crew of *Sacajawea*, the majority of which had come aboard long after she had left the ship but she recognized this man immediately. After all he was not part of the crew, wasn't even a member of Starfleet. "Mister West?"

The bald man turned his head slightly to see who had come for him. "Commander, thank God. I thought everyone had gone."

"We're the last ones."

He nodded slowly.

"Computer, time to hard deck?"

*"Two minutes, twelve seconds. Immediate evacuation is recommended."*

West's eyes opened a bit wider. "That's not a good thing, I take it?"

She shook her head while she inspected the manner in which the beam had trapped the reporter. "At our current speed and entry angle we'll be crushed like a raw egg once we hit the lower atmosphere."

"I'm sorry I asked. Can you get me out of here?"

She frowned when she couldn't see an obvious way.

He noticed. "I know the noble thing would be to say to forget about me and to save yourself but to tell you the truth, I've never been very noble, Commander. I would really appreciate it if you didn't leave me here to die."

"Let me think for a moment."

"Yes, yes, of course, but please, think fast."

She tried to move the debris manually, ignoring the searing hot pain shooting up her still natural hand but the beam hardly moved at all. "Computer, reduce artificial gravity on deck six, section forty-four baker by thirty percent. Command authorization Star-Bravo-34-Yankee."

A discouraging trill from the computer indicated that things weren't going to be that easy. *"Unable to comply, that command authorization is no longer valid on this vessel."*

"Of course not, thank you, Evan," she grunted while trying to move the debris once more without any success. Mahoney had naturally deleted her command codes from the ship's computer the moment he had taken command, spiting her one final time even from beyond the grave.

It was obvious she needed something with more leverage to produce the required lift. Searching the rest of the debris, she found a narrow rod of solid duranium sticking out from a nearby heap and after pulling at it for a moment it came loose. It was just about the right length.

She quickly managed to squeeze it in-between the strut which was keeping West pinned to the ground, using the debris as a fulcrum. She looked at him. "As soon as you feel the pressure gone, you need to roll free. You might only have a couple of seconds."

He nodded.

Then she pulled down on her impromptu lever with all her strength. At first it seemed like a futile effort, as if no amount of force she could ever produce would make the slightest bit of difference. She threw her entire weight against it and the strut lifted off the ground perhaps an inch or so.

West did as he had been told. He moaned loudly in pain but understanding the precarious situation, he pulled himself free.

Star let go and not a moment too soon. She felt as if all her strength had been drained from her body. She still somehow managed to get West back onto his feet but his right leg was useless. They had to support each other to remain moving.

She spotted what looked like an undamaged escape pod and pointed at it. She nearly collapsed on the way there, and for the final few meters, she was basically using the bulkhead to keep from falling over.

He managed to crawl in first and then looked up at her while she followed inside. "I think I just thought of the perfect ending to my article."

Star rolled her eyes as she secured the hatch. "Why do I think I'm already regretting saving you?"

But he shook his head. "You're going to love it, Commander. *War hero selflessly rescues intrepid reporter from doomed ship*. It's going to be a must-read."

She quickly strapped herself in, not bothering pointing out that he had not yet done so and then slapped the release controls.

The small pod jerked away so suddenly that West painfully fell onto the floor of the lifeboat. He glanced up at her, seeing her buckled in and with a little smirk on her face. "Maybe I can work on that headline."

"It's not too late for me to open that airlock. I can always claim that the escape pod malfunctioned. Those kind of things happen all the time."

The look on his face made it clear that he wasn't quite sure if she was joking or not. With some effort he pulled himself back into his seat. "Surely you won't expect me to just drop my story just because you happened to save my life, do you? I have my integrity to uphold after all. Besides I've already written an outline and everything. And I can tell it's going to be a great piece. Maybe even Pulitzer-worthy."

She rolled her eyes again and glanced towards the single viewport. The pod had rotated slightly so she couldn't see *Sacajawea* anymore. Her relief that the thrusters were pushing the tiny vessel back towards a higher and more stable orbit quickly vanished when she spotted the intimidating sight of one of those Thulian ships. The blade-shaped vessel was heading straight toward them, giving the impression it was fully intent to cutting them up like a roast dinner.

West spotted the ship as well. "I guess it's too early for the celebratory champagne."

There was a general unspoken rule in combat which stated that you never destroyed escape pods, unfortunately Star could think of more than a dozen races who didn't believe in such restraint. She knew far too little about the Thulians to know where they came down on that particular issue.

The more she considered the incoming warship, the more she feared that their manner of dealing with them might have been to crush them outright, the tiny pod would hardly even register against their shields.

And then, not unlike a guardian angel, *Eagle's* comparatively massive hull suddenly swooped in, appearing from seemingly nowhere to place herself in between the Thulians and the escape pod.

Star didn't even have the time to utter a sigh of relief before she felt the familiar sensation of being atomized.

She appeared alongside Atticus West on a transporter room mere seconds later and was promptly thrown down onto the pad when the ship was struck hard by incoming fire, no doubt a thank-you from the warship which *Eagle* had just cut off in order to protect the escape pod.

"We have her, bridge, as well as one civilian."

Star looked towards the transporter console to see Chief Chow aiming her one of his huge grins. She nodded in acknowledgment of the timely rescue and then limped towards the doors, throwing one last look over her shoulder. "Get yourself to sickbay, Mister West."

She didn't wait for a response and rushed towards the nearest turbolift once outside, thankful that the starship designers had seen it fit to locate the transporter room fairly close to one. She asked for the bridge and was deposited there less than twenty seconds later during which she could feel *Eagle* take at least a couple more hits.

She practically stumbled out of the lift and was surprised that it was Leva who caught her before she could go spiraling to the floor. She shot him a thankful glance.

"Glad to see you were lucky enough to make it out of there in one piece, Commander. What about the captain?"

She shook her head. "Not quite so lucky, I'm afraid." And yet even while she said this, she could not manage to work up any kind of regret for the man's passing. Perhaps the way he had gone had been a harsher fate than she had wished on anybody, but mostly she felt regret that he wouldn't get to answer for the things he had done.

It wasn't hard to tell that the Romulan wasn't all too broken up about losing his commanding officer either.

Perhaps, she wondered, that was the worst part of it and she hoped that when her time finally came, there'd be at least somebody, somewhere who would feel some sort of sorrow over her passing.

She had no time to consider those thoughts and half stumbled and half walked down the command area to reach the seat at the center.

"Dear Lord, you look awful." Katanga had rushed to her side, belling his age, and helped her the last few steps and until she could practically fall into the seat the Vulcan science officer had vacated for her. "You shouldn't even be up here in your condition. You need sickbay, young lady."

But she resolutely shook her head. "Later. We've got more important things to worry about first." She glanced at Xylion. "How many people did you manage to rescue from *Sacajawea*?"

“Initial estimates indicate that we recovered two-hundred and four crewmembers plus one civilian.”

Star couldn't hide her surprise. That was everybody save for Mahoney.

In the meantime, on the screen, *Sacajawea* had brought an inferno upon itself. The Starfleet frigate was entirely engulfed in flames as it continued its uncontrolled plunge towards the surface of the moon.

She watched the spectacle with a mixture of different feelings. She had, of course, secretly hoped for such an outcome. She had imagined this very image and seeing the ship she had never felt at home on, which had never felt like it had been her command to begin with, on which almost every officer who had served under her had seemingly had his own agenda, and which had ultimately served as her last posting before her disgrace, seeing that very ship destroyed or forever lost.

And yet she felt nothing but shame. For her own dark musings on the subject, for all the crewmembers who had lost their ship and even for Starfleet which could ill-afford losing another vessel following a devastating war. Perhaps, she thought, she would look back on this one day and consider it some sort of cathartic event, her past burning up to allow her to truly start over anew. But for now all she could do was feel sorry for the pointless destruction of it all.

A sudden and intense jolt to the entire ship reminded her that the crisis had not yet passed. “Status of the Thulians?”

“We have weakened both ship's shields however they remain otherwise undamaged,” Trinik said from tactical.

Xylion glanced at Star. “Our priority has been to harass and distract both vessels from targeting *Sacajawea*.”

She nodded. “Yeah, well, she's gone now, isn't she? Which means we're done playing nice. Mister Leva, are you willing to help us out at tactical?”

“I thought you'd never ask.”

She smirked but didn't turn to look around. She was in too much pain to move, let alone stand. “Mister Culsten, attack pattern Omega-Four. Commander, I want quantum torpedoes, full spread, all targets. Don't hold back on my account.”

The Krellonian helmsman acknowledged the order and a moment later so did Leva who had easily fallen back into his old role of chief

tactical officer, Trinik, the Vulcan who had handled matters at that station in his absence offering no complaints.

The screen shifted from the dying Starfleet ship as *Eagle* accelerated away from Mittias IIIb but only so they could put sufficient distance between them and the Thulian ships as to safely deploy the most powerful torpedoes in their arsenal.

Before Star could issue any other orders however Katanga had shoved a medical tricorder close to her face, its trilling sounds and blinking lights acting as quite an irritant. She pushed the device away with a frown. "I can't think with this thing in my face."

The doctor shot her a dark scowl. You have a dislocated arm, multiple bruised ribs and a mild concussion. You're suffering from acute hypothermia and oxygen depletion. It's a wonder you're even conscious."

"And yet, somehow, I'm still alive." Star glanced down at the display in her armrest, realizing that they had reached the minimum safe distance to fire. "Fire quantum torps."

"Torpedoes away."

Katanga shook his head. "Not sure I call this alive."

She turned her head with an annoyed expression. "This is really not the time, Eli." When she realized that intimidation wouldn't work on the man, her features soften, becoming almost pleading. "Please, just let me deal with this. The moment this is all over, I swear I'll follow you to sickbay and let you run every treatment and test in the books without so much as a sound of protest."

He nodded slowly and then relented. But he stayed close by, no doubt so that he could continue to monitor her vitals.

"Direct hit to both vessels. Their shields are fluctuating."

Star nodded slowly. They had made their point, let them know they meant business. Time for their attackers to get the message and back down.

Instead they responded in kind and she was nearly thrown out of her seat.

Stanmore grimaced. "They are returning fire. Shields down to sixty-six percent."

Star realized too late what the Thulians were up to next. For a moment it appeared both ships were on some sort of mad kamikaze run, heading straight for *Eagle* at flank speed. She quickly disregarded that as their strategy. Things were not yet that desperate. Both vessels separated

shortly before they reached the Starfleet ship. Star leaned forward in her chair so suddenly it hurt. "Evasive!"

But Culsten was already shaking his head. "They're staying with us."

The two smaller ships had taken up position directly at *Eagle's* flanks and opened fire, from both sides at the same time.

Star had to hold on for dear life as the ship was being pummeled hard. It felt what she imagined it must have been like on a warship during the gunpowder age, being stuck in between two enemy ships, as if in a vise and getting a double broadside.

Trinik read out the damage reports. "Lateral shields are down to twelve percent."

"Picard Jump."

Star smirked at hearing Leva's succinct recommendation, once again being reminded why the man was so damn good at his job. She nodded. "Do it, Mister Culsten, do it now."

"Aye, sir."

The Picard Jump was a maneuver based on a more complicated tactic most Starfleet officers learned at the Academy. While the full Picard Maneuver involved visual trickery created by a sudden acceleration to faster-than-light speed, the Picard Jump was just another term for a quick acceleration to warp one while engaged in combat, usually employed as an evasive action faster than any enemy ship could compensate for. In this particular case, the jump would have an additional benefit.

It lasted less than a second, and with inertial dampeners in place, Star hardly felt a thing. The screen simply shifted suddenly and with a growing smirk she could see the two ships ripping into each other, instead of into *Eagle* which had occupied the space between them less than a second previously.

"Come about and fire at will."

*Eagle* switched onto the offensive once more as unleashed phasers and torpedoes while rushing passed their two targets.

"Severe hull damage to both vessel." Star could hear the smile in Leva's voice. No doubt he was enjoying the payback for the destruction of *Sacajawea*. Sometimes it wasn't difficult to tell when his Romulan side asserted itself. "A few more hits and they're finished."

But when Star turned towards her left, she caught a glance of Xylion's face and it was not encouraging.

"I'm reading a sudden energy spike on the lead vessel." The Vulcan turned from his console to consider Star. "The energy reading is similar to that of an energy dampening device."

Her eyes opened wide, knowing full well that those weapons had been used by the Breen during the war and had nearly wiped out Starfleet forces before they had been able to create an effective defense against them. A defense *Eagle* did not currently employ since there were no Breen in the vicinity. "Mister Culsten –"

It was too late. The sudden blue flash engulfed them and the lights and consoles all around the bridge began to flicker.

"Status report?"

"I'm having trouble with navigation." Culsten's hands were flying over his controls but with apparently little success.

Leva experienced a similar problem. "Weapons system and shields are fluctuating."

She looked back at her acting first officer. "Commander?"

"It is not the exact same weapon design deployed by the Breen and it appears to be less effective." Xylion jumped to his feet and rushed towards the science station at the back.

"Effective enough," Katanga said, glancing around the bridge.

"A full computer reboot should allow us to restart all systems." The science officer had reached his station and promptly went to work.

In the meantime Star could see on the flickering screen the ominous sight of the two Thulian ships turning towards them slowly. She knew they were both heavily damaged but without properly working shields, weapons or engines, *Eagle* would be an easy prey even for them. "Work fast, Commander. We don't have a lot of time."

"A complete reboot of the main computer will consume at least forty-nine seconds if disregarding all safety protocol." He never stopped his efforts, even as he spoke.

Leva shook his head as those two ships crept closer. "We don't have forty-nine seconds."

Star winced, realizing he was right. And the Thulians apparently wanted to make sure that this time *Eagle* could not escape as they moved closer to maneuver into an optimal firing position. They had already destroyed one Starfleet ship today, they'd have little qualms about annihilating another one.

"Commander!" Star squinted slightly, expecting an imminent barrage of torpedoes.

"Thirty-one seconds."

She shook her head. They'd fire much sooner than that. She wasn't sure if her career could survive getting two ships shot out from under her in the same day.

Then the shooting started.

But it were the Thulian ships which were being hit. And hit hard.

"Yes." Culsten raised a clenched fist. "Looks like we made some new friends."

Star nodded slowly as she watched a couple of small Cardassian escorts swarming the larger Thulian warship and unleashing phasers and torpedoes. She had already learned the hard way that those ships could pack quite a punch, considering their small size.

The Thulians had no choice but to abandon their designs on *Eagle* and turned to defend themselves instead.

A few moments later the headache-inducing flickering lights, view screen and consoles died and everything went dark instead.

Star moaned. "This is not an improvement, Commander."

Of course had she been patient for just one second longer, she would have had no reason to complain as every single system came back to life then.

"Full system functionality restored." Xylion stepped back to the chair next to hers with long confident strides.

She shot him a brief, appreciative nod as he took his chair again and then focused on the screen once more. "Mister Leva, let's end this, please. I don't want them destroyed but I really want them to regret having gotten out of bed this morning."

"Loud and clear, sir."

*Eagle's* payback was swift and devastating as Leva let them have a taste of the majority of the weapons at his disposal, firing phasers on pulse mode, and unleashing a couple of torpedo spreads peppered with quantum projectiles and yet keeping the assault tightly focused on the two Thulians to avoid striking one of the Valerian crafts in a crossfire.

It took less than a minute until the attackers realized that the battle had decidedly turned and that they were now hopelessly outgunned. The lead ship turned for an escape vector first.

“Cease fire.” Star watched with a satisfied nod as the first ship jumped to warp and then the second follow shortly after.

For the first time in a good while she allowed herself to relax in the chair and as the adrenaline slowly began to fade, the pain of her battered and bruised body began to reassert itself with a vengeance. She winced as she tried to fight through it. She had one more job to do. “Stand down from red alert and then hail the Valerians.”

A moment later a middle-aged and purple-haired man appeared on the screen, typically round nostrils at the side of his nose. “*This is Colonel Whetal of the Valerian Spaceforce. Do you require assistance?*”

Star smirked. “Funny I was just going to ask you that. I’m Commander Star of the Federation starship *Eagle*. It appears we may have gotten off on the wrong foot, as my human colleagues like to say.”

The man offered a confused look as he clearly didn’t immediately understand the idiom. Then he began to nod as he pieced it together. “*I suppose that was partially our fault as well, Commander. But as you can appreciate, we assumed that you and your other ship were aware of what the Thulians were up to and that you were supporting their efforts.*”

“Considering that it appears that certain Federation officials have been accepting their help on Valeria, I can certainly understand your concerns and why you may not have trusted us at first. But let me assure you that this is not official Federation policy. We already have personnel on the ground on Valeria trying to remedy this situation and to bring our troops home.”

Whetal didn’t appear all that convinced. “*I do not envy whoever is doing that job. I have met General Lam and he is a hardheaded individual if I’ve ever knew one. A number of our security forces have been trying to oppose him and this war you’ve brought to our world, in fact, if it weren’t for those orbital weapons platforms you and the Cardassians left behind we would have helped them.*”

Star hadn’t known that. “What we’ve learned here may make it much easier for us to get the Marines to stand down, Colonel. I’ll be ordering this ship back to Valeria at full speed. But first, I believe we are still hosting one of your men whom you might want to take back.”

He nodded. “*That would be appreciated. We will follow you as soon as we have evacuated our base. Many of us brought our families here after the war heated up and we’re all eager to set foot onto our own soil once more.*”

“And you will again shortly, I’m convinced of that.”

He nodded thankfully. “I hope you remain right.”

The link terminated then and the starscape with Mittias IIIb in close proximity replaced the image of the Valerian officer.

Star pulled herself onto her feet with some effort. Katanga was at her side in an instant, steadying her. "Do you want me to get you a stretcher?"

She shook her head. "I think I can just about manage." She looked at Xylion next. "Commander, get Nora and her team back from the surface." Star spoke to the helmsman next. "Mister Culsten, as soon as everybody is back, set a course for Valeria. Speak to Hopkins down in engineering; I don't care if we blow every single warp coil in the process, I want to be back there the day before yesterday. Push these engines to their absolute limit."

The Krellonian smirked. "Ludicrous speed. Understood."

Tazla Star's eyes came to a rest on the doctor. "I believe we have a date. And I could really go for some of those pain killing concoctions of yours right about now."

“Tell me, how do Starfleet officers feel about suicide attacks?”

Sharval’s question had played on his mind before she had even asked it and ever since he had realized that the tank was heading straight for the valley which contained Lam’s power plant. At their current speed the vehicle was likely not going to survive going over the edge of that cliff but gravity would make sure that neither would the power plant. And without the plant the war was basically over. Lam would not have the resources to launch his offensive. Owens’ mission would be a success even if he would not live to see the end of it.

And the truth was that he would not think twice about giving his life to achieve a mission which would ensure thousands lived. In fact it was his obligation as a starship captain and a Starfleet officer to make such a decision if the occasion called for it. And during the war he had been tested on that very point more than once.

But there was something else to consider here. It wasn’t just his life he would sacrifice, it would be Sharval’s and Deen’s and Wasco’s and the rest of the men in the tank and of course dozens of Marines in the facility below. If he had been Vulcan, perhaps he would not have hesitated but Michael Owens was very much human and as such he was not yet ready to choose the most drastic option. There was still a flicker of hope.

Sharval turned her head and briefly made eye contact.

He shook his head.

But the Valerian woman remained stone-faced as if she didn’t care what his answer would be. She’d do it either way, take the decision out of his hands and keep going over that cliff to destroy Lam’s ace in the hole for once and for all. After all she was as determined to end this foreign war on her soil. And was she not a terrorist, willing to risk her life and those of others to achieve her goal?

Owens’ fears lasted less than a second. Her face turned into one of her wide grins again. “Aw hells, I’m too young and pretty to die like this.”

She whipped back around and hit the breaks hard, steering the tank sharply to the side in order to avoid plunging it into the valley below.

Owens squirmed for a moment as he felt the massive vehicle skittering across the ground, having turned sideways now and sliding

dangerously close towards the cliff and once again seemingly defying gravity as it balanced on two wheels. Owens leaned heavily into the other direction, willing the tank to fall back and keep it from rolling over and tumbling uncontrollably down that cliff.

Sharval mirrored the move in her seat. He wasn't sure if it made a difference in the end but he still uttered a long sigh of relief when the behemoth finally came to a stop with a last, hard bounce, just a few meters from where the ground began to dive perilously towards the valley.

For a moment nobody spoke, as if neither of them could believe they had survived. Then she swiveled around to the pilot chair. "Close call."

"Very much so, yes."

She stood. "Say what you will about me, but there's never a dull moment when I'm around."

He reciprocated her smile. "That's a way of looking at it." He glanced past her and out of the forward viewport. The vehicle had turned almost one hundred eighty degrees in that last desperate maneuver, making it fairly easy to look back the way they had come from. The view was not encouraging. "Unfortunately our troubles are far from over."

Outside he could spot the first of half a dozen Marine shuttles approaching the ridge to set down. As expected Lam had brought a small army, not willing to take any chances. And with the valley now at their back, the Marines could easily surround them.

Owens turned away and left the cockpit, trying to figure out his next move. In the spacious loading area of the tank he found Gul Belore, DeMara Deen and Wasco along with ten Marines and six Valerian security troopers. Not even close to half the men Lam would be bringing down on them.

His eyes were quickly drawn to the far wall, there, strapped tightly to a bunk was the injured Jonar Arik. A Valerian officer, presumably one with medical training, was tending to the Deltan who looked deceptively calm with no apparent external wounds. Had it not been for his paler than usual face, Owens would have guessed the man was merely resting.

Deen had clearly not moved from his side, even during their escape attempt through the forest and their very near crash into the valley. She was doing her best to stay clear of the medic but kept holding on to Arik's hand and her eyes remained focused on his face.

The Valerian stepped up shaking his head and then made eye contact with Deen. "I'm sorry, his internal injuries were too severe. There is nothing more I can do."

She looked at the man with complete shock before she turned back towards the dying Marine. Owens could see his eyes slowly opening, looking at the Tenarian and his lips beginning to move. It must have taken him an enormous amount of effort to do so. Owens could not hear what he was saying but Deen quickly moved her head closer to listen to his last words.

Deen pressed her lips on his dry and now still lips before she hugged him tightly.

The next time he spotted her face, he could see the tears in her eyes. He carefully approached her. "I'm sorry, Dee."

She made eye contact with him then, stood and reached out for him. She didn't seem to care in the least at that moment that he was her captain, her superior officer, that they were surrounded by strangers and that Lam's Marines were gathering just outside. Instead she hugged him tightly and he could feel her petite body trembling against his as she was crying. She wasn't a Starfleet officer in that instant but a young, twenty-five year old woman who had lost a person who had quite suddenly become incredibly important in her life again.

It wasn't fair, Owens thought. The war was supposed to be over and Jonar Arik had been killed, not by the enemy but by a stray phaser blast fired from a fellow Marine in a conflict that made about as much sense as the continued war on Valeria.

He prayed that this wouldn't break her. Not like it had nearly broken Nora Laas when she had lost Gene Edison or how it had nearly broken him when Jana Tren had died. So far Deen had come through the war mostly unscathed, it had taken a toll on her of course, it had on all of them, but he had always figured it harder on her, after all she had been raised a pacifist, had known about war only intellectually when she had grown up and for most of her Starfleet career. He had always feared that it would change her irrevocably and perhaps this was the last straw.

"I'm so sorry." He reached for her shoulders and pushed her away slightly so that she could look up at him, her tears rolling down her cheeks. "But I need you to be strong now. We will morn for Jonar once this is all over but it isn't yet."

She nodded slowly. He knew she understood this, of course, but battling her emotions wasn't easy. She swallowed hard and wiped away her tears. Then she turned to look at Arik's body again. Thankfully one of the Marines had found a blanket to cover him up.

"Captain, I think we've got something over here."

Owens let go of Deen, hesitantly, but found her strong enough at least to stand by herself and then glanced at Wasco who was kneeling next to the comm booster. The man looked as serious as ever. Owens was sure the death of a fellow Marine had shaken him as well but he knew how to hide it much better.

"What is it?"

The major pointed at a small display on the device. "We have contact."

Owens stepped closer and then could see it too. A starship was in communications range, either in orbit or fairly close to it. And he recognized the transponder signal. He opened a channel without further delay. "Owens to *Eagle*, do you read?"

At first there was nothing but silence.

"*Eagle*, do you copy?"

"*This is Star. It's good to hear your voice again, Captain. Are you alright?*"

He was surprised how relieved he felt at hearing Tazla Star. He had been so busy over the last few days, only now did he shamefully admit that there had always been a small nagging feeling in the back of his mind, wondering if his ship was alright. Wondering if he hadn't made a huge mistake in sending her away with Star in charge. To make matters worse, he knew that the distress signal they had responded to belonged to her old ship, the very same which had started her spiral into infamy and disgrace. He had a ton of questions but for now he knew they had to wait. Instead he needed to figure out a way of how *Eagle's* sudden appearance could help him achieve his mission. Maybe even how to keep them all alive.

He shot a brief glance at the covered body of Jonar Arik. "Things aren't going well down here, I'm afraid. What's your status?"

"*We've just returned. We're having some trouble with the orbital platforms. It appears the Starfleet satellites are malfunctioning and are considering us an enemy vessel. We haven't been able to enter orbit yet.*" Her voice was heavily distorted and the channel was filled with distracting static. A few words were so badly mangled Owens had to guess them.

He glanced out of the viewport where he could see the first shuttles touching down. "I don't think that's a malfunction, Commander. Things have gotten somewhat out of control down here and since we last spoke. Is there any risk to the ship?"

*"We don't believe so. The platforms have a limited range so as long as we hold position we should be fine. It's close enough for communications but we are out of transporter range for now. If you require an urgent extraction, we could attempt to make a run for it."*

Owens shook his head even though she couldn't see that. "Negative. You would have to lower your shield which would make you an easy target." He looked up and out of the viewport again. But this time the one on the other side of the vehicle which allowed him a good view of the power plant in the near distance. He could spot a number of large shuttles which were now crowding the landing platforms and which hadn't been there before. No doubt they had arrived to load up fully charged energy cells for weapons, shields and other equipment and transport those to the forward operating commands in order to distribute them to the troops getting ready for Lam's offensive. He considered his options once more and arrived at a decision in only a couple of seconds. "Commander, are you in range to carry out a targeted orbital strike?"

*"We should be able to get closer long enough to carry one out. But with all the scramblers in effect on the surface, it's going to be real tricky to acquire a target."*

"That's fine. Leave the targeting to us. I need you to standby to deliver a heavy payload close to our position within the next few minutes."

To her credit Star didn't hesitate. *"Understood. Sir, there is something else you should know. We've identified that the Thulians have been assisting both Starfleet and Cardassian forces on Valeria for a few months now."*

Owens looked up again and this time finding Sharval who had since left the cockpit. Her eyes widened at that revelation.

*"We believe it is part of some sort of convoluted plan to potentially invade Valeria and secure it for themselves."*

"The Ancient Enemy." Sharval nearly whispered those words.

Owens nodded as he realized that even though he understood that Sharval's Ancient Enemy came straight out of Valerian legend, he also knew that very often legends had their roots in fact. Regardless of fact or fiction, however, the Thulians assisting Lam and perhaps even Gul Metral suddenly made a great deal of sense.

"Sir, we got a lot of movement out there."

Owens turned around to find Wasco who was observing the Marines outside, most of which had now disembarked from their shuttles, heavily armed, aiming their ordnance at the tank. The vehicle had already proven its sturdy design but Owens was fairly certain it wouldn't hold up a second time, and not to the kind of heavy weapons the Marines had brought along this time. He gave Star final instructions before he closed the channel.

"Alright, let go and face the music."

"We'll be able to do much more than that." Belore had taken position next to Wasco, glancing out of the viewports. "It appears the general did not trust his men enough to carry out our arrest. He's come himself."

Owens quickly realized he was right. The general had stepped out of one of the shuttles, armed with nothing more than a holstered sidearm and flanked by half a dozen Marines, including the hard-nosed Andorian sergeant they had run in on a few occasions.

He nodded. "Perhaps there's still a chance to end this without further violence." Owens felt Deen's hand on his upper arm and turned to look at her.

Her eyes were still red but the tears were gone. She looked at him with an intensity he could not recall seeing on her face before. Her sadness now replaced by sharp, ugly anger. "Why? Let's just get *Eagle* to blow his plant to dust and with it his plans to keep this war going. Let's end this all here and now."

The cold tone in her voice sent shivers up his spine. But he shook his head. "It'll take *Eagle* a little while to get in position and warn the people inside the facility. We have to buy them at least that much time and we can't do that hiding in here."

She didn't look convinced at all but she did let go of him.

Owens took a deep breath, found his phaser rifle again even if he was certain that it would do him little good, and then opened the hatch to be the first one outside.

The others followed him with out delay. Deen, surprisingly was the second one out, hefting her own rifle and staying close to her captain. Wasco and Sharval flanked him on his other side while the rest, including Belore, the Marines and the Valerians spread out to form a united front against Lam and his men.

There were at least forty of them now on the ridge and Owens could spot a couple more shuttles approaching in the distance.

Lam made his way to the front of his men, even as his bodyguards remained close. "This is it, Captain. This is as far as you go. You've made it quite a chase for us and under different circumstances I would find this all very amusing. Unfortunately and what you so tragically fail to realize, the fact remains that your little antics are having serious consequences in delaying the timetable of a meticulously planned military campaign."

"I wouldn't call peace antics, General." Owens faced off the other man less than fifty meters away, not missing the forty to fifty phaser rifles pointed at him and his team. He had to believe that at least a few of them were aimed at him and were set to kill instead of stun. Lam could always call it a tragic accident afterwards.

Lam shook his head. "I don't. But what you are doing here has nothing to do with that. You think of yourself as a man of peace, Captain and no doubt you are telling everyone who will listen that I am a dangerous man. But the truth is that you are far more dangerous than I could ever be. You are a small-minded apologist, Captain. A man with no consideration for the future or the bigger picture. If it were up to you, we'd all lay down our weapons and go home, ignoring the threat right at our doorstep. And get stabbed from behind the moment we've turned our backs."

"You mean the Cardassians, General? The ones willing to consider a peace that you have ignored. Tell us, are you so convinced of your victory that you simply cannot fathom a peaceful end to this conflict? I suppose considering that the Thulians have been helping you build your power plant, you feel pretty certain of your chances, don't you?"

Lam looked momentarily surprised, the first time as far as Owens could remember that his carefully schooled features had slipped to allow some doubt to creep onto his face. It was quickly dispelled. "You may not understand warfare, Captain, not the way a true warrior does but if you are determined to win, you take every advantage you can get."

Sharval offered a fierce grin. "So you don't deny it? How about the fact that Metral is getting the same assistance? Or that you have made a pact with an enemy of Valeria who is seeing this as an opportunity to take our own planet from us?"

But if Owens or Sharval expected Lam to appear surprised by this news, he knew well how to hide it. For a moment Owens thought that perhaps he simply refused to believe that he could have been fooled in such a way, but then he understood that matters were far worse than that.

He took a very small step forward, making certain to move carefully so that no Marine with a nervous trigger finger would put a hole into his head. "You knew, didn't you? You're a smart man, General. Some say you are on the fast track to become the next commandant of the Marines and after that who knows where you could end up. You are not the kind of person to get fooled easily. Which means you knew all along what kind of game the Thulians were playing here."

Lam's face remained as firm as a stone mask.

Sharval looked disgusted. "And you speak about protecting us? This was never about Valeria."

The general shook his head. "Don't you see? Everything I've ever done was for Valeria and the Federation. I tried to convince Starfleet Command of the dangers but they wouldn't listen. So what else could I do? I have put measures in place, I've made the preparations. When the Thulians come, the Marines will be the ones left standing and we will be the ones defending Valeria. It's what we do."

There was a moment of stunned silence as Owens tried to understand if Lam truly believed his words. It was difficult to fathom.

Two more shuttles set down on the quickly crowding ridge and Wasco was the first to realize that these didn't belong to the same battalion as the others. That they had in fact ridden in very similar shuttles only a short time ago. "It's van der Meer."

Owens turned and true enough, the statuesque colonel disembarked from one of the shuttles, armed with a phaser rifle and accompanied by a dozen of her men.

Lam shot her a displeased glare. "Colonel, you are supposed to stand by at Phoenix and await instructions to commence the offensive."

Van der Meer took in the scene in front of her before she glanced towards her commanding officer. "I figured perhaps you needed assistance."

The general considered her for a moment and then nodded.

Owens couldn't tell for the life of him which side she was on.

It was then that Lam noticed the commotion in the valley below. A number of shuttles were taking off in a hurry and Marines as well as support staff were seemingly abandoning their posts while alarm klaxons blared throughout the facility.

"What the hell is going on down there?"

Owens shot the man a piercing glance. "They are evacuating, General."

Lam looked up, confusion all over his face now. "What?"

"I have instructed *Eagle* to destroy your power plant. I am ending this war, one way or the other."

The other man took a sudden step forward. "You can't do that. Without the additional energy produced by the fusion plant Metral will have the advantage and attack. Even you wouldn't be foolish enough to sign the death sentence for thousands of Marines, not to mention millions of Valerians."

"Watch me."

"You will contact your ship and order them to stand down."

But Owens just shook his head. "It's over, General."

"Like hell it is." He turned around to find his men. "Get me a channel to *Eagle* right this moment."

To Owens' chagrin, Lam's men quickly produced a very similar portable comm device he had employed to speak to Star. Sergeant Thalos removed a compact handset which was connected to the unit wirelessly and brought it to the general. "Channel open, sir."

Lam practically ripped the device from the Andorian's hand. "Starship *Eagle*, this is Lieutenant General Xiaogang Lam. As the ranking Starfleet officer in this sector, I am taking operational command of your ship and you are ordered to stand down forthwith."

There was no immediate answer, just static, as all eyes were focused on Lam and the small device in his hand.

"*Eagle*, do you here me?"

"*This is Commander Tazla Star.*" Her voice still sounded distant and buried underneath persistent white noise. And yet nobody missed her next words. "*Eagle will take no orders except those of Captain Owens.*"

Michael fought to keep a grin off his face at seeing Lam's furious expression. He felt pride swelling in his chest at Star's display of loyalty.

"You're making a grave mistake, Commander."

"*I guess I'll just have to add it to a growing list, General.*"

"Listen to me carefully. Captain Owens has been relieved of command. He has chosen to align himself with enemies of the Federation. He no longer holds any authority over your or your vessel. Now follow my order and stand down."

Star hesitated for a moment. "*Let me speak to the Captain first.*"

Lam pondered the request for just an instant. Then he held up the device and towards Owens. "Tell her to stand down, Captain." He unholstered his phaser with his other hand and pointed it at him. With a flick of his thumb he adjusted the weapon's power settings, making it unmistakably clear that he was willing to employ deadly force to accomplish his aims. "Do it or you will be solely responsible for what happens next."

Michael was certain that the general was good enough of a shot to cut him down easily from that distance. It had been a calculated move on his part. He had not expected Lam to shoot him down in front of all his men and now van der Meer as well. He had underestimated the lengths to which he would go but then of course Owens had planned all of this before he had realized that General Lam had known much more about what was happening on Valeria than he had ever let on.

Michael didn't have a death wish but if he had to lay down his life in order to stop a madman from waging a war, then that was a sacrifice he was willing to accept. "I will do no such thing, General. I suppose you'll just have to shoot me."

Lam's face twisted into rage as he brought the handset back to his mouth. "Commander Star, I have your captain at gunpoint. I will execute him right here and now for high treason against the Federation which is within my right to do, unless you follow my order this instant and back off your vessel."

It was an almost impossible position for Star to be placed in and Owens knew it. He took a step closer. "Tazla, whatever happens, you have your orders. I expect you to follow them."

It took a moment for her to respond to this and when she did her voice sounded more distant than ever before. "*Understood, sir.*"

"This is your final warning, Captain, order your ship to stand down or you will regret it."

Owens took a small step forward even while lowering his rifle. "I think the only person who will regret their actions here today is you, sir."

Lam raised the phaser pistol higher, unable to keep his anger from swelling over. "Don't make me do this."

"It's in your hands, General."

Deadly silence had fallen over them all, dozens of men and women, most of them trained to be fighters had become perfectly mute, almost as if

a single errant breath could set off the powder keg being ignited in front of their eyes.

The only sounds: the distant alarm klaxons down in the valley and the downpour of steady rain which soaked everyone on the cliff equally and which had long since become the background soundtrack of this world.

Michael saw the flash first.

And even through the persistent silence all around him, he was not sure if he actually ever heard the sound of Lam's pistol firing.

He had perhaps a microsecond, probably less, to prepare himself for his own death and even in that brief moment he realized that it was far too little time. It didn't much matter. There wasn't enough time in the universe to prepare oneself for paying the final price.

General Lam was too much of an expert marksman as to miss on that distance with a weapon he was likely intimately familiar with and as much as Michael would have liked to think that he would face his imminent death with wide open eyes, he couldn't help himself but flinch and blink the moment that bright light erupted from Lam's gun.

He was struck hard.

But not from the front as he had expected.

Instead the impact came from his side and with such force he was slung to the floor.

The first thing he saw when the world around him took shape again were Cesar Wasco's eyes. The Marine was lying just a few feet away and it took Michael another moment to understand what had happened.

Wasco had jumped forward at the last second, pushing him aside and taken the brunt of the blast instead. Owens was the first one to reach the downed Marine, beating DeMara Deen by a mere heartbeat. She had uttered a desperate cry the moment the shot had rung out, believing her captain had been gunned down only to find Wasco having played the role of the guardian angel to his last and making good on a promise he had made to Nora Laas.

Lam's weapon had been undeniably set to kill, the large and bloody wound on Wasco's chest giving ultimate proof of this. His shirt was already soaked and blood was trickling down the corners of his mouth. Owens knew immediately that Wasco was already gone even if he made the futile effort to attempt to staunch the large wound, drenching his hands in dark red blood mixing with the rain.

Owens looked up at Lam who appeared stunned that he had shot not just a fellow Marine but a man he had no doubt considered close to him. "I need a medic here."

But Lam didn't move, perhaps showing indecision for the first time in his life.

It was van der Meer who jumped into action instead, rushing towards Owens and her fallen friend with a handful of her Marines, one of which had already a medkit in hand. The medic fell onto his knees and Owens made room to let the man work.

Van der Meer looked down at her friend with a horrified expression and only barely maintaining her professional demeanor.

"How ... how is he?"

Owens looked at Lam, the first words he had spoken since he had fired that shot. He had dropped the handset, likely disconnecting the link to *Eagle* and now stared wide-eyed at Wasco with obvious concern. As far as Owens could tell, it came far too late. Wasco was dying.

The medic confirmed this just a moment later by sadly shaking his head.

It made Owens furious. Two good people had already died because Lam was determined to keep fighting his war, determined to protect the Valerians from Cardassians, the Thulians, maybe even from themselves. Perhaps some of those goals were legitimate but none of the methods he had used were even close.

Owens faced the general again but before he could speak, he heard the thunder. It took him a moment to realize that it wasn't the weather which had been responsible for the sudden roar in the sky. It was *Eagle*. Star had stuck to her orders even though she probably didn't know if her captain was alive or dead.

Everyone on the ridge turned to look up to see the bright crimson lights shooting through the clouds and moments later smashing into the power plant.

Lam turned to see his hopes of winning his own private little war incinerated in front of his eyes. "No!"

Owens was relieved that he could spot no movements or even shuttles anywhere close to the facility before the torpedoes slammed into it which most likely meant the evacuation had been completed successfully.

It took only those first three antimatter projectiles to annihilate the facility and the entire ridge rumbled under their feet when the fusion

reactors ripped themselves to shreds, blowing a small mushroom cloud high into the sky. The fires would rage for a while longer but the steady rain would make sure it wouldn't spread to the surrounding forests. Lam's ace in the hole was no more.

When Owens turned back around he could see that the general had stepped up next to Major Wasco's dead body. He had dropped his weapon, letting it fall onto the ground and even his bodyguards were now keeping their distance.

Van der Meer spoke up first, not able to keep the anger out of her tone. "General Lam, under the authority given to me by the Starfleet Uniform Code of Military Justice, chapter thirteen, section nine, I am temporarily relieving you of your command, pending a formal review of the incident that has transpired here."

Lam looked up at her but said nothing, not offering a defense or resistance.

The colonel glanced at her men, not trusting the general's Marines to carry out her orders, and they stepped up next to Lam.

He looked at them before his eyes found van der Meer, then Wasco again and finally Owens. "Whatever I did, I did it for the good of the Federation."

Owens just shook his head. "The sad thing, General, is the fact that you truly believe that. And yet all you have accomplished here is weakening it."

He had no response for this as he let the Marines escort him towards a shuttle. There was a short tense moment when Sergeant Thelos stepped into their path, the Andorian clearly not happy to allow them to take his general away. But in the end, he stood alone and when he realized this, he too moved aside to let them pass. A short moment later he followed his general.

Owens looked at van der Meer. "It's your show now, Colonel."

She just shook her head. "I'm not the next highest ranking officer on Valeria."

"You're the highest ranking Marine here. Besides, you're the one who has detained the general. It is you who will have to give the next order."

True enough every last Marine assembled on the ridge was now looking at her.

It took her a moment to regard all these men. She glanced at her dead friend last.

A few of her men had already attended to his body, covered it and were in the process of placing it a stretcher to be transported.

Deen looked at the colonel. "Jonar didn't make it either. They both deserve a proper burial."

"And they'll have one." Her eyes made contact with the Cardassian and for a brief moment Owens thought that she would place the blame for everything that had happened here at his feet. "Mister Belore, I think it is time that the two of us have another chat. Then we need to get in touch with Gul Metral who I am certain is already preparing his counter offensive. With any luck we can end any more bloodshed before that happens."

Belore nodded.

She considered Owens. "And then, Captain, you'll have your peace."

It took him a moment to respond and when he finally did he sounded tired and beaten even to his own ears. "It's not my peace, Colonel, and it never was. It belongs to all of us. God knows we've all bled enough for it."

## EPILOGUE

### 1

It had been two days since the *Sacajawea* had been destroyed and it had taken him that long to make a decision. In retrospect, he realized that he had in fact arrived at his decision the moment he had stepped back onto *Eagle's* bridge after he had barely escaped the stricken ship alive. It had taken him a couple of days to think things through and to make sure this was what he truly wanted.

"I've read your report, Commander, and I agree with Commander Star that your actions were entirely justified. Captain Mahoney not only overstepped his authority but also recklessly endangered lives on the surface of that moon as well as that of fellow Starfleet officers when he gave the order to continue firing on that base. You were well within your right, I'd even argue it was your duty, to oppose him at that point."

Leva nodded at Owens while standing in the ready room and in front of the captain's desk. "I would request that Starfleet shows leniency to the officers who sided with Mahoney."

The captain looked up at him, scowling slightly. "Starfleet has made it clear again and again that it is not looking for people who blindly follow orders, Commander, but understand the difference between right and wrong. Mahoney was wrong and so were those who stood by him."

"I understand that, sir. But *Sacajawea's* crew was young and inexperienced."

He shook his head. "That is not an excuse."

"Maybe not. But if there was one thing that became clear to me after joining that ship it is that more than anything, that crew lacked proper leadership. Mahoney had already practically removed himself entirely from daily operations at the time and Lieutenant Alendra, even though she did a remarkable job keeping things going, had been delegated far more duties than anyone could have realistically expected from her. I thought I was beginning to make inroads, maybe I could have turned things around if I'd have had the chance to serve on her for a longer period of time, but as

it was, the crew was so disengaged thanks to Mahoney's command style, it is little wonder that most did not even know what to do when the time came."

The captain considered all this silently before he made eye contact with Leva again. He nodded slowly. "Very well, I will take your recommendations under advisement. However, I can only suggest a course of action. Starfleet Command will have the final word as what will happen to *Sacajawea's* crew."

Leva was fairly certain that Owens had accumulated enough pull with the powers that be after commanding *Eagle* for over four years that they would listen to what he had to say. Of course Leva had not been happy that some of his officers had sided with Mahoney when he had challenged the man but in hindsight he could certainly understand their reasoning. And he still felt a certain loyalty to this crew, even if they had turned against him; even if their ship had broken up and burned up in the atmosphere of a small, inconsequential planetoid at a far corner of the galaxy.

"There is one other matter I'd like to discuss with you, sir. It pertains to my next assignment."

Owens looked up again. "It will only be a formality until you are cleared of any wrongdoings, Commander. Once that's done, I'm sure Starfleet will still have plenty of places for you to make your mark, including, I'm sure, more open first officer billets."

But Leva didn't share his optimism. After all he had mutinied against his captain, and even though Starfleet would justify his actions, this mark would forever be part of his career. Very rarely did starship captains feel entirely comfortable working alongside an officer who had turned against their previous captain. Leva expected that it would make his career progression a challenge. But that was not the reason why he had made his decision. "I would like to request to be reinstated to my former position."

Owens' eyes grew a little wider in surprise.

"I know it's an inconvenience and that you have every right to decline my request, sir. All I can say is that over the last few days I have realized the value of true loyalty. I'm not talking about the kind which is expected from those who serve in Starfleet. I'm talking about the kind of loyalty which comes naturally because you care about the people you serve with. And because you want to be part of something you can believe in. I believe in you, Captain, and I believe in this ship and her crew."

The captain's expression remained firm and inscrutable. "Commander, when you left this ship, I told you that I consider this crew family."

"I know. And I broke up the family."

"You misunderstand how family works, Commander." Owens allowed himself a small smile to break his otherwise serious visage. "The way I see it, family is forever. And the most important part about family is that they forgive each other and that they welcome those with open arms who eventually find their way back." He stood and offered Leva his hand. "Welcome back, Commander."

So'Dan Leva smiled and didn't hesitate to take the captain's hand. He was home again.

\* \* \*

Only moments after Leva had left his office, Tazla Star and DeMara Deen practically rushed into his ready room as if they were trying to beat each other to it.

"This is the dumbest, stupidest, most pointless thing I've ever heard."

Owens regarded the upset Tenarian, once again realizing that she hadn't been quite herself since Jonar Arik had died. She had spent the first day after their return mostly by herself in her quarters, turning down any visitors, including him. Once she had finally reemerged she had seemed angrier and much more irritated than normal. Her aura which seemed to surround her wherever she went and which would often force a smile on people's faces even if they felt down or disconsolate seemed to have vanished.

Michael stood from his seat and aimed his young friend a questioning glance. "What exactly is it that's so pointless and stupid?"

But Deen was simply shaking her head, clearly still too upset to speak and instead began pacing the room.

Star was more forthcoming. "The *Teotihuacán* has just arrived along with a few troop transports to take the Marines and the Cardassians back home. They're mostly civilian freighters but they should have enough capacity for our needs."

Owens nodded, seeing this mostly as good news. It had after all been two days since the war on Valeria had formerly ended with both Marines and Cardassian forces standing down after Colonel van der Meer and Belore had successfully negotiated a truce with Gul Metral. But the high number of troops still on the surface had remained a source of tension between all parties, especially the Valerians who could hardly wait to have all foreign troops fully evacuated and finally have their planet back for the first time in nearly two years. *Eagle* had not been suitable to transport that many troops and so they had to wait until more appropriate transport vessels could arrive. In the post-war chaos it would have taken weeks to get Starfleet to dispatch proper troop transports and he was thankful Command had managed to think creatively enough to resolve the Valerian situation by temporarily appropriating civilian ships for this task.

“I don’t understand the problem.”

Deen stopped pacing and shot him a venomous look as if his failure to understand was the source of the issue. Then she glanced at Star. “Commander, would you kindly explain Starfleet’s immense stupidity.”

The Trill nodded and looked at the captain. “The *Teotihuacán* has deployed a number of emergency subspace relays on her way here to allow us to communicate directly with Command. They have been advised of the situation on Valeria and what has transpired –”

She was going too slowly for Deen’s liking who took a step towards Owens. “General Lam, the very same man responsible for this entire mess, the same man who shot and killed Major Wasco, who ordered our deaths and who is solely responsible for Jonar losing his life; Starfleet Command wants that man back on Earth to be reassigned to Marine Corps headquarters effective immediately.”

Owens regarded her astonishment, understanding her anger now. Considering what Lam had done, at the very least he would have expected a court martial and immediate dismissal from the service, perhaps even prison time for disregarding orders, manslaughter and attempted murder. And he was certain any JAG prosecutor worth his salt would have been able to add a dozen or so more charges to the list.

After Lam had been detained, van der Meer had advised him that upon closer scrutiny of his communications station, they had in fact located Starfleet’s original orders which Owens and *Eagle* had been sent to Valeria to enact. It had turned out that Lam had indeed received notification of the end of the war and was fully aware that he was supposed to find a way to

end the conflict. It had explained why the man hadn't been more surprised when he had told Lam the good news. The general had known all along. But he had chosen to ignore those directives and the messengers who had brought them in favor of his own designs. He had escalated the war instead of finding a way to end it.

But regardless what he had done, Lam clearly still enjoyed powerful connections back home which must have moved heaven and hell in a hurry to have him avoid the fallout he so clearly deserved. He would lose his command, of course, probably would never receive another promotion and certainly would have to give up on any ambitions of becoming commandant or more someday. But Owens agreed with Deen, it was a slap on the wrist and nothing more and certainly not the appropriate punishment for his sins.

Owens regarded Tazla Star who managed to keep her own feelings on the subject much better hidden. Of course she had not been on Valeria or met Lam but she had read the reports and knew what Owens and the others had been through. And she could relate to some degree as she too had once faced Starfleet's wrath for her mistakes. Except that in her case, she had not gotten away nearly as cleanly as Lam was about to.

Deen's eyes were hard when they focused on Owens again. "What are we going to do about this?"

"I don't think there is much we can do." Star regarded the younger woman. "Starfleet has ordered us not to discuss anything that has happened on Valeria. They want to make sure none of this becomes public knowledge."

That did not help to alleviate her anxiety. On the contrary. "I cannot believe this." But she kept looking at the captain. "Michael, please tell me we'll find a way to make him pay for what he's done."

He wanted nothing more than do just that but was forced to slowly shake his head instead. "We start talking about this, I have no doubt Starfleet will come after us instead. Let's face it, we don't have nearly the kind of clout Lam has."

"That's not good enough. We have to at least try."

"Dee, listen to me —"

"No, I'm done listening." She turned on her heels and rushed out of the room.

Star looked after her before she regarded the captain again. "I hope she won't do anything stupid. It could destroy her career."

Owens sighed as he took his chair again. "I think her career is the last thing on her mind right now. I've never seen her like this before. Let's give her some time to process the things that have happened. Hopefully that's all she'll need."

The annunciator signaled another visitor and Owens looked towards the doors. It appeared the entire ship wanted a piece of him today. "Come in."

Gul Belore entered the ready room, offering the first officer a short nod before the Cardassian stepped up to the desk. "Captain, I hope this isn't a bad time."

It certainly wasn't the best time but Owens decided to not let him know that. "Not at all, Gul Belore, please take a seat. I haven't seen much of you over the last couple of days and I had wanted to express my gratitude to you for your invaluable help in ensuring Gul Metral agreed to the ceasefire. I don't think it would have been possible without your efforts."

He took the offered seat. "It was my pleasure, Captain. In the end however, I believe it was you who convinced Metral that the war was over and that my people had surrendered."

"I don't follow."

"After the general was taken into custody, Colonel van der Meer made sure that the message you recorded was broadcasted planetwide. It reached Metral and his people as well and after they reviewed the documents, they came to the conclusion that they were authentic and that the war was over. It didn't take much convincing on my part after that."

"I see."

Belore offered a smile. "You are quite the diplomat, Captain. Have you ever considered a career in that field? You'd might find it a very rewarding experience."

"Very rewarding or extremely frustrating. After all I wasn't all that successful in convincing General Lam."

He nodded. "Not at first, no. But I don't believe an entire diplomatic cadre would have been able to sway that man's mind." Belore stood. "I won't take any more of your time, Captain. Besides I still have much to do now that we have reached an agreement with the Valerians."

Owens was confused. "Agreement?"

The Cardassians looked surprised for a moment. "They haven't told you yet? I apologize I was under the impression they had shared the good

news. You see, the reason I have been mostly absent for the last few days is because Gul Metral, myself and the chief magistrates of Valeria have been working on a joint agreement which would make Valeria a protectorate of the new Cardassian Union. Now that it has become obvious that the Thulians have designs on Valeria, we have pledged to defend their world by keeping a contingent of troops on the surface."

Star looked at Belore as if he had just grown another head. "You cannot be serious?"

"Oh, quite so, Commander. And in return for offering protectorate status, Valeria has agreed to become an exclusive trading partner with Cardassia which will be invaluable to us following the devastation the Dominion wrought upon our people."

Owens could feel his anger rising at having been blindsided by this smooth talking diplomat turned soldier. He left his chair. "Gul Belore, neither you nor Gul Metral have the authority to make these kind of deals or offer such assurances. Following the Treaty of Bajor Cardassia itself has become a protectorate of the Federation Alliance and I cannot see how they will allow such a deal to be honored, especially if it involves a continued Cardassian military presence on Valeria."

"I believe they will, Captain. I've studied the text of the treaty very closely and nothing we have proposed does in any way violate that treaty. And I imagine that Starfleet and the rest of your allies will be far too busy with the fallout from the war to worry about a few thousand Cardassian soldiers on Valeria."

Star shot the man an icy glare. "I thought you told us that those men are desperately needed back on Cardassia to help your people rebuild."

"I also told you that I'm a patriot. Which means that I will do whatever I believe is best for Cardassia. Securing this trade deal is worth the cost of keeping soldiers on this planet." He looked back at Owens, an almost contrite expression on his face. "I suspected you might react in this manner and I'm sorry that you cannot see that this is going to be good for both of our people."

Owens wasn't quite over the shock yet. "And how do you figure that?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? With Valeria's help, the burden of rebuilding Cardassia will no longer be solely on the shoulders of the Federation and your allies. The Valerians made it quite clear that they no longer have any interest in trading directly with the Federation. It appears General Lam has

left a rather poor impression on the Valerian people.”

“And you’re telling us that Gul Metral treated the Valerians any better?” Star shook her head, not able to believe this.

“You’d be surprised, Commander.” Belore offered the captain one last glance. “Now you’ll really have to excuse me, Captain, as I said much still remains to be done. I will not require your generosity to return me to Gamma Seven, I’m certain I will find my own way. And for what it’s worth, Captain, it was a pleasure working with you. I wish you well. Good day to you both.” And with that he turned and left the ready room.

Owens uttered another sigh but was still too worked up to take his seat again. “The good news just keeps on coming.”

“He’s certainly been a busy man.”

Owens nodded. “The worst part about all this is that I cannot blame the Valerians for turning to the Cardassians. Lam has done a lot more damage here than just unnecessarily prolonging a war. He’s single-handedly destroyed the Federation’s reputation on Valeria, perhaps even in this entire sector.”

Star appeared thoughtful while she kept her eyes on the now closed doors.

“What’s on your mind?”

She slowly glanced towards Owens. “If I remember right, this is exactly the way the Cardassians started out on Bajor before it turned from a protectorate to an all-out occupation.”

Owens couldn’t help but be reminded of what Lam had said about his rationale for continuing the fight. He had been concerned of precisely this kind of outcome. Was it possible that he had been right after all? Michael dismissed that notion. And even if it was true that by planting their flag on Valeria, the Cardassians had set in motion events that could lead to much more than a protectorate status down the road, it was Lam and his bullish ways which had allowed for the situation to develop in this manner. In his near fanatical pursuit to protect Valeria from the Cardassians and the Thulians he had almost ensured the very thing he had tried to avoid.

“And here I was beginning to think that Cardassia has changed.” Star aimed the captain a disappointed look. “Maybe not nearly as much as we would have hoped.”

But Owens shook his head resolutely. "Maybe they haven't but we have. We will not allow Valeria to become another Bajor. At least not while I'm around."

Only much later did he realize how much he had sounded like General Lam then.

\* \* \*

He found her sitting by herself in the upper part of *Eagle's Nest*, slowly picking apart a Bolian soufflé but with seemingly limited interest in consuming the sweet desert.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

She looked up at him and then nodded, indicating towards the empty chair opposite hers.

Leva sat with his Romulan Ale, taking a small sip as he considered Marjorie Alendra playing with her food. "How have you been?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"The captain has agreed to let me rejoin the crew and resume my old post."

She looked up, a small smile forming on her blue lips. It was a meager effort at best. "Good for you."

He nodded. "It is. Truth is I enjoyed the challenge on *Sacajawea* at first but in the end I realized I was never really comfortable there and I'm not sure if I ever would have been even if ..." He didn't finish his thought. It was never a good omen to speak of a doomed vessel. Especially so soon after the fact.

Alendra looked up at him and right into his green eyes. For a moment Leva thought he could spot anger there, as if he were to blame for *Sacajawea's* fate. It vanished before her focus wandered back towards her desert. She was still not eating it.

"Have you spoken to anyone else from the crew?"

She shook her head without really making eye contact. "Not really. I had a couple of words with T'Sara and Preston but they're mostly all avoiding me now. Can't say that I blame them."

"We were right to stand up to Mahoney, don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

She nodded but still refused to look back at him.

“What do you plan to do next? After the inquiry I mean.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I was thinking that I might leave Starfleet. If the stop-loss order is rescinded any time soon that is.”

“That would be a shame. You’re a good officer, Marjorie.”

When she finally looked up again, her eyes were shooting daggers into him. “I’m a mutineer, Commander. Who’d want me to serve on their ship?”

“You stood up for what is right. And you have a lot of experience, you’re versatile, somebody like you will be in high demand.”

“Is that why *you* are staying on *Eagle*?” Her tone had taken on a cold edge.

He nodded slowly. “Alright, I guess I deserve that. And yes, I understand we will always have that footnote in our files. It won’t be easy to overcome, but that’s not why I decided to come back here. I genuinely enjoy serving on this ship and the company of the people here. Maybe more than I’d enjoy trying to start over somewhere else. Even if it came with a promotion.”

She regarded him carefully and then she nodded. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.”

He shook his head. “Don’t worry about it.”

Alendra smirked. “Are you sure? I’ve seen that Romulan temper flare up before, not sure I want to wake that beast again.”

He laughed and after a moment she allowed herself to relax as well.

“Join me on *Eagle*.”

“What?”

“I’ve spoken to my second-in-command at tactical. He’s overdue for a promotion and looking for a new assignment now that I’ve come back and selfishly aborted his own career progression. He’s a good officer and somebody will snap him up in no time. That means there is going to be a vacancy available and you’d be perfect for it. I’m sure the captain would agree.”

She shook her head. “I’m not a tactical officer.”

“I’ve studied your file. During the war you’ve done a bit of everything, including tactical. You’re bright, resourceful and a quick learner, I’m sure you’d pick things up in no time. Granted, it’s not a senior position and if you really wanted to, I suppose you could do better on the

open market, but with a bit more time, I have no doubt you'll rise through the ranks if that's what you want."

Alendra considered that for a moment before she spoke. "You know, to be honest, I actually wouldn't mind a role with a little less responsibility for a while. Maybe this could work."

He nodded. "You'll enjoy serving on *Eagle*. I know you've struggled on the *Sacajawea*, that it wasn't a supportive environment. Starfleet isn't supposed to be like that. And trust me, serving on this ship will be very different from what you have known."

"It would mean you'd be my boss again?"

"You could do worse, I'm sure."

She dug into her soufflé and then offered him a large smirk, her white teeth stained with the sticky blue desert. "I guess, if you put it that way; I'm your girl, Commander."

He pulled slightly at the tight collar of his white uniform dress shirt, but didn't complain, after all the occasion had called for the dress whites. No, there was nothing wrong with the uniform, Michael Owens just hated funerals. He had attended far too many of them over the last two years, many of which had been short affairs, held on the holodeck or a cargo bay after the latest battle.

This one was planetside and yet no less tragic. In fact, perhaps even more tragic considering that the two men they had come to honor had lost their lives long after the war they were supposed to fight had ended. Their deaths seemed so pointless and unnecessary. It made him angry just thinking about it.

It wasn't a true funeral as no bodies were being buried here. Instead they they'd be shipped back to Federation space shortly to be interred on Andor at the Memorial Cemetery as was customary for Marines fallen in battle. But first the two men would get a service right here on Valeria, surrounded by hundreds of their fellow Marines.

They had used a scenic piece of land just outside the capital, with rolling hills and for once somewhat clear skies for the service. Owens noticed that even the rain had stopped but later realized that the Marines had erected a nearly invisible energy shield to keep the proceedings free from the persistent drizzle.

Everyone was wearing their dress uniforms, including the Marines whose outfits had much more green to Owens' whites. Van der Meer had brought a couple of hundred men from her battalion, most likely those who had known Jonar Arik particularly well. Judging by the stricken looks on most of their faces, the man had been well liked among the troops. A few hundred more had joined from various other units on Valeria. General Lam was not present and no doubt quite a few Marines wondered why that was, after all the full details of what had taken place immediately before the destruction of the fusion power plant had not been made public. There were plenty of rumors making the rounds of course, but only Van der Meer and the most senior officers on Valeria possessed full knowledge of Lam's transgressions.

Owens could spot a number of high ranking Marine officers in the crowd, led by the tall Scandinavian who Starfleet had formerly placed in charge of the withdrawal. He could see familiar faces among Wasco's company, all of which had come from *Eagle* to pay their respects. DeMara Deen was amongst them too, looking resplendent in her white and gray dress uniform jacket and doing her best to keep her grief and anger in check.

All of *Eagle's* senior officers were in attendance, along with Tazla Star. There was even a small cluster of Valerians at the fringes of the service, making sure to keep their distance from the Marines. They too wore their best uniforms and Owens could spot Sharval amongst them. As far as Owens could tell, the only civilian present was Atticus West, the FNS reporter who had since fully recovered from his brush with death on *Sacajawea*. He was tapping away on a padd, indubitably planning to incorporate this event into his latest story.

Van der Meer had spoken first and given a heartfelt speech commemorating both Jonar Arik as well as her friend Cesar Wasco. Then it had been Michael's turn to address the few hundred people who had come here to mourn. He had kept his regards brief, understanding that he wasn't a Marine, that he was an outsider and as far as the majority of his audience was concerned, didn't fully understand sacrifice the way they did. He didn't agree but this was hardly the place to set them straight. He had been, however, Major Wasco's commanding officer and as such he had made sure to praise the man's dedication and loyalty. A loyalty which had cost him his life. And while he hadn't known the man very well personally, not nearly as well as the rest of his senior officers, it hadn't been difficult to find words to describe his uncompromising ethos. He could also not help but feel at least somewhat responsible for his death. Not because Lam had targeted him and Wasco had saved his life by giving his, but because it had been Owens who had talked him into coming along to Valeria. Wasco and his unit had been due to disembark following the end of the war but instead they had followed him to Valeria at his insistence. He took some comfort in the thought that he didn't believe he would have been able to be successful here had it not been for Wasco's invaluable assistance. Thousands would most likely have lost their lives if not for their combined efforts.

Some more officers, NCOs and even a few enlisted men took the podium overlooking the two flag draped coffins after Owens, speaking

highly of both Wasco and Jonar Arik. There had even been a few subdued laughs when the men talking about the Deltan remembered his good-natured humor and his occasional antics.

Star had approached him after the last words had been spoken and the honor guard had fired their rifles into the sky. "That was a good speech, sir."

"Add this to the things I won't miss now that the war is over."

She nodded slowly but they both understood that giving speeches at funerals was part of the job of being in command. All Owens could hope for was that he would have a lot less occasion to dust off his dress whites for a while.

He spotted DeMara Deen standing close to Wasco's sealed coffin. She glanced towards them for a brief moment but then diverted her eyes again as if she didn't wish to even look at him. He uttered a heavy sigh.

"Hey there, Sky Knight."

A small smile came over his lips when he heard the familiar voice and he turned to see Sharval approach, wearing a meticulous azure uniform.

Star shot Owens a puzzled look.

He quickly shook his head. "Don't even ask." Then he glanced back at the approaching woman. "Commander Star, please meet Sub-commissioner Sharval of the Valerian Security Forces. She has been instrumental in helping us achieve our mission here. Sub-commissioner, this is Commander Tazla Sar, my first officer."

Sharval smirked at Owens. "Sub-commissioner? I suppose the occasion does call for some formality." Then she considered the other woman, paying especially close attention to her bright red hair. Considering how much she had liked Deen's, Owens suspected she had a thing for hair. "A pleasure, Commander."

"The pleasure is mine, Sub-commissioner. And allow me to express my thanks for taking such good care of my commanding officer."

The smile on her face grew wider. "It wasn't always easy, was it, Sky Knight?"

He nodded. "We had some close calls."

All three of them briefly glanced towards those coffins containing the bodies of the two men who had not been as lucky.

Sharval uttered a sigh. "Well at least we achieved something, didn't we? What will happen to the general now?"

Neither Starfleet officer wanted to answer that one.

It caused Sharval to utter a little, mostly humorless laugh. "Oh, let me guess. Your brave and wise leaders have decided to do nothing at all about a man who's been responsible for so much misery on my planet. Are they giving him a promotion for this?"

"He is not likely to ever command another regiment." But even Star didn't sound satisfied with that outcome.

"I suppose he's a fortunate man then. If he stayed here to face Valerian justice, we would certainly come up with much more creative punishment."

Star turned to Owens. "Captain, I've been thinking about Starfleet's orders on this subject. I understand we are not supposed to talk about what happened here but this doesn't mean other people wouldn't be able to ask questions."

Owens considered her for a moment as he tried to figure out what she was implying. Then a smile formed on his lips when he realized that she was indicating towards Atticus West.

Sharval didn't understand.

"The man is a reporter. And with a little bit of prompting, this might be just the right kind of story for him to expose to a wider public."

The Valerian began to nod. "If he wanted to speak to me about what happened here, I'm sure I'd have quite a bit to tell him."

"Perhaps I should go and have a chat with our intrepid reporter."

Owens nodded. "Good idea, Commander."

The Trill shot the other woman a parting glance. "A pleasure, Sub-commissioner."

"And mine." She offered a wide grin. "And please, call me Sharval. By the way. The bright red hair? I love it."

"Right. Thanks." Star was clearly caught on the back foot by that compliment and then departed quickly.

Sharval kept looking after her. "I do like her. She has an intensity to her."

Owens nodded and then spotted the hard look in her eyes focusing on him. "What?"

"You two wouldn't be mates, would you?"

He rolled his eyes at her inappropriate jealousy. "No, Sharval, we're not mates. She's my first officer."

"Good." Her fingertips brushed against his chest as they had done on previous occasions.

He took her hand gently, lifting it away from him and then looked her straight in the eye. "Listen, Sharval, I think we need to talk."

She uttered a laugh, this one so loud a few nearby Marines glanced their way.

Owens took her by the elbow and led her to a slightly more secluded area.

She offered no resistance. "You speak like one would to a companion to dissolve a long-running courtship."

He shook his head. "We don't have a courtship."

"I know. And I suppose you are about to tell me that we'll never have one, either. That you are a starship captain with responsibilities and hundreds of men to command. That you cannot afford distractions while you make decisions every day that could mean the difference between life or death. Decisions that could affect the fate of the entire galaxy."

He frowned.

"Am I close?"

"I wasn't going to mention the fate of the galaxy."

She responded with a smirk and then moved in and kissed him right on the lips before he could stop her. "One thing you should have figured out about me by now, I don't believe in never. Maybe there won't be a courtship today or tomorrow or even in a week from now. But who knows what the future brings?"

He smiled. "I suppose you're right."

"Of course I'm right."

His face turned solemn once more. "But I'm concerned about the future of Valeria. I don't like the idea that your people have decided to allow the Cardassians to stay here."

"You are worried that they will take advantage of us poor, defenseless fools?"

He sighed when she refused to take this seriously. "No. I've come to realize that you are anything but defenseless but the Cardassians have a history in this kind of thing and the last time they extended a hand of friendship to a planet, an entire people ended up being enslaved to them."

"This won't happen here. We know about Bajor and what the Cardassians are capable of. We'll be on our guard and once we have rebuilt our own military to defend ourselves from possible Thulian aggression, we'll make sure the Cardassians drastically reduce their forces here. We might even send them packing altogether."

Owens looked anything but convinced.

"And if they won't go willingly, I have a valiant Sky Knight I can call to make them change their minds." Her smirk was back, large as ever.

He uttered a sigh but then nodded. "I don't know what the Federation would do in such a case and I can't promise that they are willing to help you if it came to it. They didn't do anything for Bajor. But I can promise you this. If you need my help, and if I'm able, I will come for you." He mirrored her smile. "Why else have a Sky Knight, right?"

She laughed again. "Oh my, I've really led you on with that Sky Knight talk, haven't I?"

"I don't understand."

Sharval pierced him with her brilliant eyes and then nodded slowly. "I suppose it's only fair I told you. The legend of the Sky Knight, the Land Maiden and the Ancient Enemy; It's about a mysterious force attacking the Land Maiden's kingdom."

Owens nodded. "And the Sky Knight comes to her rescue. I've heard countless similar stories before."

But Sharval shook her head with a smile. "Well this one's different. The Sky Knight means well but in the end he's rather useless against the Ancient Enemy. You see in the legend he's really more of a comedic character and a terribly awful fighter. Instead he makes the Land Maiden realize that she cannot depend on the help of strangers. As a result she gathers her strength and her wits and leads her people against the Ancient Enemy herself and triumphs in the end while the Sky Knight does nothing more but watch on from afar."

Owens couldn't believe it. "So this entire time you were making fun of me?"

She shrugged. "It was more of an endearing term."

He couldn't help but laugh at that. It served him well, he decided, after all she had used the name so frequently he had almost started to believe it. Now that he realized that the legendary Sky Knight was a clown instead of a hero, he felt somewhat relieved. "Maybe I'm the Sky Knight after all. I do feel a bit of a fool now."

She shook her head. "You'll always be my hero. And perhaps, if all it takes to get you back here is for the Cardassians to behave badly, maybe I'll help them along. Just make sure you keep your glorious Federation out of it. We've had quite enough of them. I only want you to come riding to my

rescue." She shot him one final, bright smile before she turned away. "Until we meet again, Sky Knight."

"So long, my fair Land Maiden."

\* \* \*

It wasn't difficult for Star to get West's attention, he spotted the redhead in her white uniform long before she had stepped up to him.

"Ah, Commander, I'm so glad I'm running into you. I know we've had our differences before but I did not yet have an opportunity to thank you for, well, I suppose, saving my life back on the *Sacajawea*."

She nodded. "Don't mention it. I see you have fully recovered from that ordeal."

"Certainly physically. Maybe it'll take a little longer to get over the psychological scars."

"I find it difficult to believe a fearless and intrepid reporter like yourself hasn't stared into the face of death countless times before."

The tall, bald and dark-skinned man considered the woman for a moment, as if trying to determine if she was being sarcastic. "Believe it or not but I'm much more comfortable working from behind a desk than from a burning starship."

"I suppose being a war correspondent isn't really your calling then."

"I guess not. Good thing it's over right?"

She nodded and they both glanced towards a group of Marines who had begun to play back pipes, filling the air with their mournful melodies.

"Don't think I've forgotten about the story I was going to write about you."

She shot him a dark sideways scowl.

He merely shrugged. "Don't get me wrong, I'm really thankful that you saved me but from what I can tell it's a really juicy story. I can't just ignore that."

"You talked to Mahoney before he died?"

"Yes but he didn't get a chance to tell me much. And to be honest the little he did tell me about you sounded more like a spiteful rant than useful facts. But I have to say, that man truly disliked you. I can only imagine what kind of number you must have pulled on him."

She shook her head but didn't look at the reporter. "Ever consider that maybe he pulled a number on me first?"

He nodded slowly. "Maybe he did. And I'm guessing you're not the kind of person to cross. Perhaps in the end he got what he deserved."

Star was tempted to agree but stopped herself short. No matter what Mahoney had done to her and perhaps even others, he didn't deserve to die. Certainly not the way he had. She couldn't exactly claim to be sorry that he was gone but that had been no way for a Starfleet officer to die. She glanced back at him. "So you're telling me that being my enemy could be dangerous and yet you are still insisting on pursuing this story of yours?"

West shrugged. "What can I say, some dangers have a certain charm. And let's face it, after coming within a hair's length of burning up on a dying ship, I'm sure whatever you might do to me is going to be far gentler."

Star shot him another venomous look to which he merely smirked. Then she looked back towards those two coffins. A procession of Marines surrounded them now as they were paying the final respects. "What if I could offer you another story? One which is guaranteed to put you back into the spotlight and maybe even earn you a couple more of those awards you always seem to be chasing."

His eyes lit up. "I'm all ears."

She shook her head when she glanced back at him. "No, first you give me your word you drop that exposé you've been working on."

West wasn't quite ready for that kind of commitment. "I don't know, Commander, how can I be sure this story is worth all that?"

"You like going after people in power, do you not? Right now all you have is a former starship captain fallen in disgrace and serving as a first officer. I'm not exactly the most exciting person in the quadrant. How would you like to expose a man with real power and influence? Somebody with friends so influential, he might even get away with murder."

She knew she had his full attention by the look in his eyes. "You're talking about General Lam, aren't you? I had a feeling there's more to this than people here are letting on. But none of the Marines I've spoken to are telling me anything. They're even more tight lipped than your crew." He shook his head. "And if nobody talks, there's really no story here."

Star smirked. "Everything's a story."

He looked at her with surprise, realizing that she had turned his favorite expression against him. He nodded slowly to concede that point. "Perhaps but not without sources."

"I'm surprised you are willing to give up so quickly. I took you for a more tenacious sort. But regardless, I might be able to point you in the right direction, maybe even put you in touch with a few people who'd love to share all the sordid little details with you." She briefly glanced away to find DeMara Deen who had not moved far from one of the coffins. "Even a few Starfleet officers. That wouldn't be on the record of course, but it should be more than enough to verify whatever else you manage to dig up. And in the end, you might even bring down another big name or two."

It didn't take him long at all to see the upside of what she had proposed. "Trade one story for another? A commander for a general?"

She nodded. "Perhaps even more."

"A story filled with shock and scandal?"

"Most certainly."

"With a chance for fame and glory?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And possibly change the status quo?"

"Oh, once you are threw with this one, nothing will be quite the same again."

Atticus West offered a growing grin. "How could I possibly say no to that?"

\* \* \*

The service was coming to an end and most of the Marines were slowly heading back towards the capital or their bases all over Valeria. Owens knew that the evacuation would commence first thing the next morning. Within twenty-four hours not a single Marine or Federation citizen would remain on Valeria, even the embassy in the capital would be shut down until further notice at the request of the Valerian government. For the time being Valeria and the Federation would not enjoy any diplomatic relations at all. It angered Owens that this had been the outcome of Lam's politics on this world. The Federation could have used Valeria as a continued trading

partner but instead the Valerians would now solely trade with the Cardassians.

Belore had been right at least about the silver lining for the Federation. Now that Cardassia could receive aid from the Valerians, the Federation would not have to extend as many of its own precious resources to help the Cardassians rebuild. Of course in the end, he wasn't sure if it would make all that much of a difference. The destruction the Dominion had wrecked on Cardassia was of nearly unprecedented scope and he feared that the Valerians help might be nothing more than the proverbial drip in the bucket. After all the Valerians had a lot of rebuilding to do themselves.

He was also still angry at Belore's back room deal with the Valerians. Of course after Lam he couldn't blame them for seeking assistance elsewhere, even if it was hard to swallow that the infamously xenophobic Cardassians had ended up being a better choice for Valeria than the usually magnanimous Federation. He was mostly upset that he hadn't seen Belore's motives coming. He had been at the man's side for nearly three days, fought and bled with him only to find in the end that he'd had his own endgame all along.

It was all water under the bridge now, he decided. There was nothing more he could do about any of it. His mission on Valeria had been to end the war and he had achieved this, even if more people had lost their lives in the process than he had been comfortable with. But he had stopped Lam from launching an offensive which could have killed thousands more and lay waste to much of the planet. Gul Metral and his troops had been ready for an impending attack, he had learned after the ceasefire had gone into effect. Like Lam, he too had received generous assistance from the Thulians and if both sides had gone into full out battle, the consequences would have been devastating. In the end the Thulians would have been the only victors. Just as they had planned, they would have found Valeria devastated with both foreign armies having annihilated each other and a good chunk of the planet along with it. It would have been easy pickings for them after that.

And yet the Thulians remained almost as much of a mystery as before. Owens wasn't sure if they really were the same Ancient Enemy as the one in Sharval's legend but they certainly seemed to fit the bill. The manner in which they hid their appearance underneath heavy masks and suits and their tendency to use energy dampening weapons seemed to

imply that they were affiliated somehow with the Breen whose territory was only a few light years from Ultima Thule. The Breen who had fought on the side of the Dominion during the war had been bound by the Treaty of Bajor in a similar fashion as the Cardassians and it was possible that they had somehow plotted to use the Thulians to pursue another military agenda.

It was all speculation of course and it was just as likely that the Thulians were nothing more than a distant Breen offshoot but otherwise unrelated to the larger empire and their interests. Owens knew it was unlikely that they would learn the full truth for a while. Maybe not ever.

For now all they could do was to remain vigilant and to keep an eye on the Thulians to make sure they would no longer pose a threat to either Valeria or the Federation. Owens had already made the conscious decision to keep himself apprised on any developments in this corner of the galaxy after they had left it behind. And it wasn't necessarily the Thulians that worried him but the Cardassians who would maintain a military presence on the surface for the foreseeable future.

He spotted Tazla Star joining him once more. "How did it go with West?"

She smirked. "I believe humans have a fitting saying. Hook, line and sinker."

Owens nodded. "Good. I think it's safe to say that once Mister West publishes his story, Starfleet will have little choice but to prosecute Lam for what he's done here."

"Knowing West, the general will probably require protective custody once the truth is out."

The captain regarded his first officer for a moment and Star clearly wasn't entirely sure why. "I meant to tell you, Commander, that I've read the reports about what happened to *Sacajawea*."

She seemed to brace herself for whatever came next.

"I won't lie to you. I was worried when I let you go off after her the way you did. I know you had bad history with that ship and I was afraid that it might cloud your judgment having to deal with her and her crew again. Captain Mahoney, I understand, was your first officer when you were her captain."

She nodded carefully.

"I want you to know that I stand behind you one-hundred percent. Mahoney's actions were irresponsible, petty and misinformed. If he had

been allowed to carry them out to their conclusion, not only would he have been responsible for the deaths of dozens of Valerians trying to protect their home, he may very well have been instrumental in assisting the Thulians from taking control of Valeria. You did the right thing.”

“Thank you, sir, that means a lot coming from you.”

He indicated towards the way that led back to their shuttle and Star fell into step beside him. “I know it’s not been easy for you on *Eagle*. And I know I haven’t always made it easier but I think we are finally at a point where we are comfortable with each other. It took me a while to get here but now I couldn’t wish for a better officer at my side.”

She offered a large smile in return. “I feel the same, sir. And I’m truly thankful for the opportunities you’ve given me. Even if it took us a while to work out all the little kinks.”

Owens responded with a smirk. “I guess some of them weren’t that little.”

“We got there in the end, that’s all that matters.”

The captain gave her a good-natured clasp on her back as they headed towards the shuttle which was parked on a nearby hill. The sun had only just begun to set over this hemisphere, drowning the rolling hills in gentle orange and purple hues and for a brief moment Michael Owens felt poetic.

Things would be very different on this world in the morning. Hopefully they would leave things behind better than how they had found them.

It was going to be a new dawn for Valeria.

Maybe even for the Federation.

“I think we’re going to make a great team, Taz. I really do.”

**the adventures will continue ...**

Check out these other exciting **The Star Eagle Adventures** titles:

### **Novels**

- #1 - *Tempus Fugit*
- #2 - *Eternal Flame*
- #3 - *Cry Havoc*
- #4 - *All The Sinners, Saints*
- #5 - *Shadows in the Haze*
- #6 - *Semper Fidelis*

### **Agamemnon Voyages**

- #1 - *The God Particle*

### **Novellas**

- *Star Crossed*

### **Eagle Vignette Series (EVS)**

- #1 - *Prelude to War*
- #2 - *Crossing Over*

### **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)*
- *When Gods Smile*
- *The Times They Are A-Changin'*
- *Who Saves The Saviors?*
- and others

Available at [StarEagleAdventures.com](http://StarEagleAdventures.com)