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MURDER

ON A STARSHIP
AND EVERYONE'S A
SUSPECT

SHADOWS IN THE HAZE

SHADOWS
IN THE HAZE

THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES #5
BASED UPON 'STAR TREK®'

BASED UPON “STAR TREK[®]” CREATED BY
Gene Roddenberry

“THE STAR EAGLE ADVENTURES” WRITTEN AND CREATED BY
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Day One: Farewell, My Lovely

- I -

It was a storm of unnatural intensity and it raged over the Mediterranean Sea with the force of a vengeful deity, torrents of rain and angry, unrelenting lightning ripping through the dark skies as if Poseidon himself had decreed the end of man for once and for all.

The roars of thunder were so deafening, they struck fear into even the bravest and most courageous of sailor's hearts. Waves the size of church towers and winds, driving at the speed of falcons, ravished the waters.

Caught in this fateful storm was a small ship, fighting against all odds to survive this hellish weather. The wooden planks creaked and bent, the large main mast weaved and the white sails had long torn away, only leaving a few shredded pieces.

The captain of the ship, a man of middle age who had spent the better parts of his life at sea, held on tight to the robes. His eyes were wide open with fear. Never before had he encountered a storm this villainous, this determined to bring an end to his life and his ship.

"Boatswain!" he shouted from the top of his lungs.

A younger man fought his way across the deck just as another colossal wave hit the ship's exposed port side and flooded the quarterdeck. The man was almost washed into the sea before he was able to desperately hold on to the railing.

"Here, master. What cheer?" he cried.

"Good," said the captain. "Speak to the mariners. Fall to't, yarely, or we run ourselves aground. Bestir! Bestir!"

The boatswain knew what to do. He nodded and headed back to where his frightened men were waiting for orders. He began barking and shouting, doing his best to keep up their morale and imploring them to save the ship.

The sailors went to work but only hesitantly. For many of them had no more courage left in them. They had seen the abyss and it was coming for them.

A number of men, dressed in fine clothes and utterly out of place on a ship in distress made their way from below deck. With less concern for their own safety they noticed the boatswain busily at work, fastening the ropes.

“Good boatswain,” one of them shouted across the deck and approached the sailor. He was an elderly nobleman with little knowledge of the seas and the dangers inherent to them. His demeanor and his stance were that of one who thought himself above the elements. Like a king. “Where’s the master? Play the men.”

“Do you not hear him?” the sailor shot back, unable to keep the annoyance out of his tone. “You mar our labor. Keep your cabins. You do assist the storm.”

“Nay, good, be patient,” said another nobleman who joined in the defense of his king. He hung on to a robe with one hand while trying desperately to keep his hat from blowing away with his other.

The boatswain gave up on hiding his anger behind a mask of decorum. If he had to die in this storm he was determined that it wouldn’t be because of the arrogance of his passengers. “When the sea is. Hence! What cares these roarers of the name of the king? To cabin: Silence! Trouble us not.”

The old man could scarcely believe the sailor’s defiance. “Remember whom thou hast aboard!”

“None that I more love than myself!” the boatswain spat back. “If you can command these elements to silence, and work the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more. If you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long, and make yourself ready in your cabin for the mischance of the hour. Cheerly, good hearts! Out of our way, I say,” he shouted to make himself heard over the thunderous noise and then pushed past the stunned passengers.

Michael Owens watched with captivated fascination as the storm finally overwhelmed the small vessel, losing its futile struggle against the elements it was crushed by the waves and ripped to shreds. Only a small number of survivors were washed onto the shores of a nearby island.

Soon afterwards the one responsible for the disastrous weather was revealed. He was an old man, wronged and betrayed by his closest confidant a long time ago and then exiled to a seemingly abandon island in the middle of nowhere. But instead of withering away as his

betrayers would have hoped, he only grew more powerful and now commanded the forces of magic. With only his beautiful young daughter for company, he had vowed to use his dark arts to have his revenge on his enemies.

Owens and the rest of the audience were dazzled by the actors who brought these vivid characters to life on the stage of a faithful recreation of the 17th century Globe Theatre in London. The stage had been enhanced with holographic technology to transform it into the actual setting of the play.

They sat and watched, sometimes laughing, sometimes applauding but for many parts in silent fascination as the plot thickened. They watched the prince, played by a ruggedly handsome young man, fall for the equally beautiful Miranda only for their passion to be foiled by her protective father.

Owens' eyes opened wider and a large smile came over his lips when he recognized a familiar face. The stunningly attractive young woman was portraying a spirit, and quite fittingly so. Her long white and green dress shimmered in the bright light, her golden hair was flowing freely down her shoulders. She sang in a voice fit for an angel.

*"Come unto these yellow sands, and then take hands;
Curtsied when you have and kissed the wild waves whist,
Foot it featly here and there;
And, sweet sprites, the burden bear."*

She quite easily seduced the young prince to follow her even though he could only hear her marvelous voice. She was like a siren and her effect was felt on the stage and beyond.

The play drew to an end. Prospero, the old mage had finally given his blessing to his daughter and the prince. He had given up his plans of vengeance and instead had decided to forgive the king for the wrongs he had done to him. As a reward his exile was to come to an end and he would be ready once more to join civilization and be restored to his rightful place. He freed the spirit he'd enslaved and asked for forgiveness for himself.

"Now my charms are all overthrown, and what strength I have's mine own, which is most faint. Now, 'tis true, I must be here confined by you. Let me not dwell in this bare island by your spell; But release me from my bands with the help of your good hands. As you from crimes would pardon'd be, let your indulgence set me free."

The audience raged with applause, more than willing to give the old man the freedom he so desired.

Owens stood and others soon followed suit until every last audience member was on his or her feet, applauding and shouting *bravo*.

The play had been a phenomenal success and the applause lasted even long after Prospero had gratefully left the stage. He returned with the other players and together they bowed to the applause many more times. They were forced to return to the stage again and again until the audience finally grew tired and the applause died down.

A few minutes later the audience and the actors mingled amongst each other in the Nest, *Eagle's* spacious crew lounge. Even though the galaxy was gripped by a devastating war, for now the mood was festive. For now the Dominion and their Jem'Hadar solider were light-years away. In fact *Eagle's* newest mission had given her crew a welcome break from fighting the enemy and Michael Owens had found the idea of having a play a great way of boosting morale. There had also been a second and slightly less conspicuous occasion as well.

The captain stood amongst his officers, patiently waiting for a chance to speak with the actors. Most of which were being questioned and congratulated by the rest of his crew. He did not wish to pull rank and butt in, after all this play had been for them.

Instead he turned to his science officer. "Mister Xylion, you haven't said much. How did you enjoy the play?"

"The performance was adequate, sir."

Tazla Star, *Eagle's* Trill first officer aimed a sidelong look at the Vulcan. "That's all you've got to say? Adequate?"

Owens was not surprised. "He is not an admirer of the writer."

"Still," she said. "It was a magnificent play."

"I do not disagree with you, Commander," the Vulcan said. "The aesthetics were pleasing indeed."

Star sighed and gave up. Her face lightened up when she spotted DeMara Deen approach the group. She had changed out of her costume and into civilian wardrobe but the young Tenarian remained as stunning as ever.

"Here comes the big star," the first officer said and raised her glass towards her.

Deen wasn't a woman who blushed easily and she didn't now. "Hardly," she said. "My part was rather small."

"It is not the size of the part, my dear Dee," said Owens. "It's what you make of it. Here is to a splendid performance." He joined Star in raising his own glass.

"Thank you, all," she said. "But it was not just me in this play. They all did a fantastic job."

Ashley Jane Wenera joined the group. The raven-haired physician had nothing but praise herself. "Indeed. But when you started singing, I swear I heard a few hearts flutter."

"How fortunate then that you were in attendance, Doctor," said Deen with a little smirk.

"What I want to know is," the doctor continued, "who was that handsome prince?"

"Lieutenant Jin Gedar," said chief engineer Louise Hopkins, who had quietly joined her colleagues. "He's Krellonian, like Lif," she said, referring to the ship's chief helmsman. "He's also one of my best engineers. A real gifted young man."

Michael and the others threw the usually shy Hopkins surprised looks. It wasn't like her to sound so assertive when outside of engineering. Hopkins blushed noticeably.

"Well I say this much for the man," said the doctor. "If his engineering career doesn't work out, he's got a splendid future as an actor ahead of him."

Everyone seemed quick to agree with the sentiment. All but Hopkins who unbeknownst to her colleagues had turned surprisingly dour for reasons not immediately apparent.

"Here he is now," said Tazla Star as Gedar had finally managed to tear himself away from his many adoring fans.

"Sir, I apologize I was held up, I should have come to see you first," the dark-skinned Krellonian said as he reached the captain. Just like Lif Culsten, Gedar possessed silvery long hair which he wore in a style to distract from his earless head.

"Nonsense," the captain said quickly. "I just wanted a chance to shake your hand. I believe the crew is in agreement that you are a most gifted young man."

"You are too kind, sir," the man responded even if he couldn't quite hide that proud smile beginning to form on his lips. The man took the captain's hand and shook it.

"You understand of course that with a gift like yours also comes a great responsibility," Michael continued. "I expect many more performance of this caliber in the future."

The engineer was grinning openly now. "I'd be happy to oblige, sir."

Gedar went on down the row of senior officers to shake their hands. Nobody noticed that the exchange between him and the chief engineer was awkwardly short.

They met the rest of the performers including a middle aged Chief Petty Officer who was nearly unrecognizable as the old Prospero without the heavy makeup.

"Very well done, Crewman," said Michael as he shook the hand of Sierra Decaux, a lithe but pretty, blonde-haired young woman who had played the part of Miranda.

The girl seemed distracted. "Thank you, sir, thank you very much," she said and then turned her head as if she was trying to find somebody else in the crowd. She seemed to have found who she was looking for when her eyes came to rest on Jin Gedar. "If you would ... if you would excuse me for a moment, sir?" she said and then turned to leave, forgoing congratulations from the rest of the senior staff.

Star shot the captain an incredulous look. "Should I feel snubbed?"

Michael just smirked. "Let's give her a break, Commander. I'm sure some of them are just glad it's over. I remember the torture I had to go through when my mother dragged me to rehearsals for school plays."

"Now there's a story I'd love to hear," said Deen.

"Not on your life."

With the obligatory handshakes and congratulations over with, Michael watched as actors and spectators began to mingle and relax again. It had been quite some time since his crew had been given a chance to do so. The ongoing war effort had not allowed for much R&R and Michael couldn't help but grow concerned about the accumulative strain of fighting a war with a physically and mentally exhausted crew.

And things were not faring well for Starfleet even now that the Romulans had joined the war effort.

Michael glanced across the room to find Lieutenant Commander So'Dan Leva, his half-Romulan tactical officer engaged in conversation with security chief Nora Laas. He remembered that it had been partially thanks to his efforts that the Romulans had joined the fray against the Dominion, even if Leva liked to point out that the real reasons had little to do with his diplomatic mission to Romulus a few months ago but much more with a surprisingly well-timed assassination of a Romulan senator by the Dominion.

The tide had started turning slightly into their favor after the Romulans had come aboard but it had soon become apparent that it hadn't turned nearly enough and not nearly quickly enough. At this rate, Michael suspected that this war, already over a year old, could drag on another five or ten years. It was a cold and terrifying thought and he barely suppressed a shudder.

"Captain?"

He turned, thankful for the distraction, to find Ashley Wenera having stepped up to him. Regardless of the dark times they lived in, the woman had possessed a radiant glow these last few weeks which almost rivaled DeMara's.

"Doctor," he said and offered a smile.

She responded in kind. "I just wanted to thank you, Captain. I can't ... I don't really have the words. Thank you for everything."

He put a hand on her shoulder. "Doctor, no thanks are necessary. Now I want you to go and spend some time with the crew. That's an order."

She nodded gratefully before she did just as he had suggested.

Deen stepped closer after Wenera had left and aimed a suspicious look at the captain. She had clearly overheard some of the conversation but had been unable to make sense of it.

Michael Owens was not willing to explain himself just yet, leaving her to her own thoughts.

- II -

"I need you to have all of these sorted by name and function before the end of the day," said Doctor Wenera to the myriad of doctors, nurses and technicians who were following her around sickbay. She pointed at another cabinet. "It's always bothered me that the stand-by sedatives are not more clearly labeled. Now is the chance to get that done."

Her people busily entered notes in their padds, nodding along.

All but head nurse Leila Adams. "Are we getting inspected by Starfleet Medical?"

"Something like that," Wenera said. "Besides you don't need an inspection to get yourself properly organized. Come on folks, let's have a sickbay we can all be proud of. And let's do it today."

The medical professionals broke up in order to get started on their chief medical officer's master plan to completely revamp a room they had worked in together for over three years.

"Is it time for spring cleaning already?"

Wenera turned to find DeMara Deen leaning casually against the bulkhead.

"Dee, I didn't see you there."

The Tenarian smirked. It wasn't very often that she could go unnoticed in a crowd. She enjoyed her rare inconspicuous moments. "No wonder," she said, "you were too busy spinning your people's heads."

Wenera took a step closer to the operations manager, concern now edged on her face. "You don't think I was too hard on them, do you?"

She shook her head and stood away from the wall. "No, I just think you're confusing the hell out of them," she said. "And all this after watching a nice relaxing play."

She smiled. "You were fabulous, I really mean it."

"You liked the play?"

Wenera nodded eagerly. "It's one of my all-time favorites."

Deen shot her a suspicious look.

"What?"

"I thought I remember you saying that before."

"Maybe I mentioned it once," she said and then stepped away and began removing equipment from one of the cabinets in preparation to have them all re-ordered.

Deen followed. "It's a bit suspicious that we just so happen to be putting on your favorite play, don't you think?"

She shook her head. "Don't be silly. The crew was in dire need for some relaxation. The fact that it's my favorite play is a mere coincidence," she said and moved on to the next cabinet.

Deen followed. "Sure. And then, all of a sudden, you get your entire sickbay reorganized. Oh and of course there is that senior staff dinner the captain has so conveniently scheduled for this evening. I suppose those are all coincidences as well."

Wenera didn't say anything to this.

The golden-haired Tenarian stepped closer to the doctor. "Not to mention those subtle mood changes I've been observing lately," she said. "And you look, I don't know, fuller, I guess. But it's not weight gain. Not really. It's something else."

The doctor froze.

"You want to know what I think?"

Wenera shot the younger woman a sharp look. "Come with me," she said and then turned to head into her office. She closed the doors behind Deen and then walked to her desk.

"I think you are with child, Doctor," said Deen with a wide grin on her face now. "I think the captain knows about it and has been putting on this whole—"

"I'm leaving *Eagle*, Dee," said Wenera after she had sat down in her chair.

That smile dropped off her face. "Say what now?"

"Tonight," she added. "I'm making the announcement at the dinner this evening."

Deen was clearly at a loss for words. She stepped up to her desk and sat down. "But why? I mean, yes, I understand that having a child is a big change but you can have it right here on the ship. We can all help out," she said, making it quickly obvious that she had secretly looked forward to welcoming a newborn child on *Eagle* and perhaps be allowed to help take care of it.

Wenera looked up. "On a starship in the middle of war? You think that's a safe place for a child?"

"I ... I suppose not."

"The truth is I feel horrible about this. This child, let's just say, it wasn't exactly planned and the circumstances of its conception are, well, complicated."

Deen had another grin on her face, a big schoolgirl-kind of grin which revealed her relatively young age.

The doctor quickly shook her head. "It's not a good story, Dee."

The grin was replaced with a look of concern.

"Only a few people know about this, including the captain who has been incredibly supportive."

"He can be a big softie at time," she said. "Don't tell him I said this," she added quickly.

Wenera offered a sad little smile. There weren't many people on board who dared talk about the captain in this manner. As a close personal friend she could get away with it on occasions.

The doctor stared at an empty wall for a moment, as if working up the courage to speak. She found it eventually. "It happened on our mission to Tiaita a few months ago," she said. "There was a man there and I very inappropriately let myself get swept up in the moment. It was disgraceful, Dee. It was entirely inappropriate."

"You're talking about the man who kidnapped you?"

She nodded slowly. "Now you understand?"

Deen looked her square in the eye. "I understand that he helped you escape from a sadistic monster determined to torture you. I understand that he helped our people to stop an antimatter bomb which would have destroyed an entire city and killed millions. A man who may be the best future that world has to end its civil war."

"Damn it, Dee, it was wrong, okay? It was completely unbecoming of a Starfleet officer and a medical practitioner to get involved with him in the manner that I did," she said angrily.

Deen was momentarily stunned by the outburst. "And yet you are going to have his child and leave *Eagle*," she finally said.

"It wasn't an easy choice."

She nodded slowly. "Who's going to take over? Doctor Nelson?"

"The *Agamemnon* will drop off Doctor Katanga when she arrives in a few hours," she said. "He's been a mentor to me for many years and an extremely capable –"

“Doctor Elijah Katanga?” Deen said, interrupting her. “*The Elijah Katanga.*”

“Yes,” she said carefully.

“The man is practically a legend even outside his field,” she continued, her eyes suddenly wide with admiration. “Isn’t he heading the interstellar relief agency at Starfleet Medical? The one you used to work for?”

She nodded. “He’s agreed to take over for me here on *Eagle.*”

Deen was smiling now. “I can’t wait to meet him. I heard so much about that man.”

“Well, that’s good. I’m glad you like my replacement,” she said, sounding a little bit hurt.

“Sorry,” she said quickly. “I’m still devastated that you’ll be leaving us.”

“Yeah, but being replaced with a living legend is making it hurt less, right?” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Deen raised her hand and held her index finger and her thumbs close apart. “Maybe just a tiny little bit,” she said with a smirk.

- III -

The captain had put on a dinner which rivaled those lavish affairs he liked to throw for their annual anniversary celebrations. This time however the occasion wasn't quite as festive.

Eagle's entire senior staff had assembled in the observation lounge along with Captain Amaya Donners whose ship, the *Agamemnon*, had delivered a team of civilian scientists and engineers for *Eagle's* upcoming mission as well as another Starfleet officer, well past middle age with short dark and graying hair and a full white beard. The man hadn't been formally introduced yet and most of the assembled senior staff threw him curious looks, not being able to quite place the officer wearing a blue medical uniform with commander's pips on his collar but sans jacket.

Ashley Jane Wenera stood after the waiting staff had filled their flutes with sparking champagne. Unbeknownst to most of the people around the table, her glass had been filled with ginger ale instead.

Eagle's chief medical officer felt her eyes beginning to water as she looked over the faces of the men and women around the table, many of which she had served with for over three years. "First of all, I realize that I owe you all a big apology for this announcement which for many of you will most likely come as a surprise. All I can do is humbly ask that you do not judge me too harshly for it. This has not been an easy decision for me to make, in fact, I think it may have been the hardest decision of my life but I believe in my heart that it is the right one."

She certainly had captured everyone's attention.

"I will be leaving *Eagle* tonight for personal reasons until further notice," she said and let that sentence hang there for a moment. As expected and judging by the blank looks of most of her fellow officers, the news came as a complete shock to them. It made this so much harder for her.

In fact only the captain and Deen had known the true occasion for this dinner, leaving all the others to speculate wildly as to why the captain had called all his senior officers together that evening.

She took her time to consider those blank faces for a moment. Lif Culsten, their young Krellonian helmsman and a close friend looked particularly shocked and she could hardly blame him. Louise Hopkins,

Eagle's chief engineer had been unable to keep her mouth from gaping open in surprise. So'Dan Leva and Nora Laas did a slightly better job at keeping the surprise off their faces and Tazla Star, *Eagle's* new first officer kept her own feelings well hidden under an unreadable mask. Considering she had been on the ship only a few months, she doubted that the Trill had strong feelings about this announcement one way or the other. Commander Xylion, the ship's Vulcan science officer demonstrated his own surprise at the unexpected announcement merely by raising one of his eyebrows.

The doctor took a deep breath before continuing. "I know how some of you must feel and that in a way it is not fair to make such an announcement in this manner but please trust me when I say that due to the circumstances leading me to this decision, I thought it was necessary to keep my departure under wraps. I kindly ask that you do not speculate as to the reasons for my transfer. Lastly, I just want to say what an absolute honor it has been to serve with each one of you. We've been through good times and bad times together, and you truly have made this more than just another assignment for me. It has been the adventure of my life and I will miss you all greatly," she said and stopped to wipe the tears off her cheeks. She turned to look at the captain. "And sir, I could not have asked for a better commanding officer. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for everything."

Owens nodded and after she had taken her seat again, he took the opportunity to stand. "Doctor. Ashley," he said. "I want you to know that we very much feel the same way about you. You have been not just my own but the entire crew's moral compass over the years we've been fortunate enough to serve with you. And no matter what the future may bring for you, I want you to know that you will always have a place on *Eagle*."

She nodded gratefully; again unable to keep those tears from streaming down her face. She blushed and quickly reached for a napkin to dry off her face.

Owens looked at their mystery guest. "In Doctor Wenera's absence, Doctor Elijah Katanga has gratefully agreed to lend his extensive skills and vast experience to *Eagle* and fill in as chief medical officer."

The dark-skinned doctor nodded. "That was a polite way of saying that I'm a very old man, Captain," he said with a smirk. "But

thank you nevertheless. I've had the great fortune of having known Jane since the day she graduated Starfleet Academy and I too had to say goodbye to her once before, so I certainly understand how you all must feel," he said and then looked at Wenera. "Jane, I just want to reiterate the captain's gesture by saying that I'm only here to keep your sickbay warm for you. As soon as you come back, and no matter how you may feel about this at the moment, I'm convinced you'll be back, you'll go right ahead and kick me out of your office."

She gave him a tear-filled little laugh.

"In the meantime," he said, addressing the entire room again, "it'll be my great honor to serve the crew of this fine ship and hopefully you won't get tired with putting up with an eccentric old man too quickly."

Tazla Star actually smirked at that last line while most of the other officers in attendance were still getting to grips with the idea of having to say good-bye to a fellow officer and friend.

"Now, my dear Jane," he continued. "Take it from an old man, youth is too short to be wasted on tears. Besides, I've been sitting here for the last five minutes smelling a lovely twelve cheese fondue and quite frankly if we don't start eating soon you'll have one last medical emergency on your hands."

This time Wenera's laugh was truly sincere and a few others joined in. "Not at my farewell dinner," she said. "Please, by all means, dig in."

Eagle's outgoing CMO didn't stay around long after the dinner had come to an end, just long enough to exchange a few heartfelt hugs and handshakes. Then she was off with Katanga to sickbay where her own extensive staff had been asked to assemble to be told that they'd have to answer to a new boss.

* * *

Michael retreated to his quarters with Amaya Donners.

"Never easy to see one of your people go," she said after the doors had closed behind her. "And it's hard on her too," she added. "Reminds me of the time I had to say goodbye to the people at Deep Space Five after I was given *Agamemnon*. I'd been there for four years, toughest

thing I've ever had to do," she said and took a seat on the sofa underneath the slanted and forward facing windows. "Well, at least until a week after and I had to go toe-to-toe with the Romulans and the Borg."

Michael went to retrieve a half full bottle of Saurian brandy from a cabinet. He poured her a glass before doing so for himself and then sat at the other end of the couch. "I don't like losing her at all. But I understand her reasoning."

Maya took a sip. "I hear a lot of good things about Katanga," she said. "Word of warning though, he wasn't lying when he said he was an eccentric," she added with a sweet smile.

He aimed a puzzled look at her.

"I've had him on board for only a few days and he's already established himself as a household name on *Agamemnon*."

"Should I be worried?"

"The man has been in Starfleet longer than both of us combined. He's got three Carrington Awards under his belt and worked with legends like McCoy, P'Trell and Quaiice."

Michael smirked. "Somebody's been doing their homework."

"Hardly. Let's just say the good doctor likes to talk and something tells me you're going to be intimately familiar with his career before his assignment here comes to an end."

He frowned.

"Don't worry, he's not that bad. I actually found it refreshing to have a man with his experience around. Feels like lately every other Starfleet officer is a wet behind the ears ensign straight out of San Francisco."

"War will do that."

She nodded with a serious expression. "And yet here you are going off gallivanting into a nebula while us real soldiers fight the good fight," the little smirk at the end revealed that she held no grudge against her friend over his latest assignment.

"It's not an exploratory mission if that's what you're thinking."

"I know. Professor Rosenthal and his team are suppose to build a new fancy sensor array in the Aphrodite nebula to allow us to spy on Dominion troop deployments. Hell, Rosenthal is so eager doing this, his assistant tried to talk me into carrying out the mission on *Agamemnon* instead to save time," she said. " But you can't tell me you're not going

to use the opportunity to try and do some good old fashioned exploring?" she added with a little twinkle.

"We won't get the chance," he said, "we're on a strict time table. We only have ten days to build that array before the radiation in the nebula becomes lethal to ship and crew."

"Shame."

Michael looked off into space for a moment.

"So, tell me about Commander Star," she said after he hadn't said anything for a while.

He looked at her. "Not sure what to say."

"Please," she said. "There isn't an officer in the fleet who hasn't heard of the infamous former Captain Star. Rumor has it she got half her crew killed after going off on some unsanctioned mission. Lost her command and was sent to the stockade only to be brought back to fill desperately needed vacancies after the war broke out. And where does she end up of all the places in the galaxy?"

"You know how it is with rumors,"

Donners looked skeptical.

"Fine, yes, she made mistakes, she went to prison for them."

"And was released early."

Owens sighed. "She did some really good work on our mission to Tiaita. If not for her actions that mission would have ended as a much bigger disaster than it already was. Her actions may have saved millions of lives."

"You almost sound as if you're trying to convince yourself, Michael."

He leaned forward. "I didn't want her here. She was forced onto me by people with their own petty little agendas but after all was said and done, you know what she told me? She was ready to pack her things and simply disappear."

"And that would have been such a bad thing?"

"She's changed, Maya. She's a different person and she's working hard on making a new start of it."

She took another sip from her drink. "In my experience people don't just change overnight," she said and then looked him straight in the eye. "Here's my question to you, Michael. When it comes down to it, when everything's on the line, your ship, your crew, the people you care about most, do you trust her? I mean completely trust her?"

He uttered a heavy sigh and let himself fall back onto the couch.
“That’s what I thought.”

Donners put her empty glass back on the table with a loud thud causing her fellow captain to shoot her a surprised look. “Here we are, in the middle of a war which hardly ever gives us the chance to see each other in person like this and I’m playing Captain Buzzkill. Fill me up, will ya?”

Michael laughed and reached for the bottle. “Careful there Buzzkill, this isn’t synthehol, you know. And I believe you still have a starship to drive tonight,” he said as he poured her another glass.

“For your information, I have very capable officers who can do that for me,” she said and took a big gulp of the emerald colored brandy. “Sometimes it’s good to be the captain.”

He offered her a large smile but left it simply at looking her way.
“What?”

“Just quietly admiring you from afar.”

“I’m not a museum piece. Come closer, you are allowed to touch.”

“Sounds like that brandy is getting to you,” he said but scooted over nevertheless.

“If there is one good thing about the Dominion,” she said as she watched him move closer, “it’s that it really makes you appreciate being alive. Makes you realize that nothing’s for granted.”

“And everything could be gone tomorrow.”

“Exactly,” she said just before she pressed her full lips against his.

His hands were on her a second later, brushing against her soft, dark skin and her satin like hair as he kissed her passionately.

They came back up for air and Maya, her nose just inches from his, looked right into his brilliant blue eyes. “That was nice. Any particular reason we’ve never done this before?”

Michael’s face turned into a frown and he actually pulled back.

“Now who’s Captain Buzzkill?”

“This wasn’t the first time we’ve kissed,” he said but avoided looking her in the eye.

“It was the first time we kissed like that,” she said. “Unless you slipped me something I don’t know about.”

But the look on his face made it clear that he was dead serious. “I tried to tell you once before.”

“Tried to tell me what?”

He took a deep breath before he continued. "It's been weighing on me for a while now. The truth is, I once cheated on you."

"Cheated on me? If you were trying to confuse the hell out of me, congratulations, you've succeeded."

"No, cheated on you is not the right word," he said, clearly struggling to explain himself to a clearly befuddled Maya Donners who had not expected the evening to take such an unexpected turn. "I cheated on somebody else. With you." She stood abruptly. "You're not making a lick of sense, mister. Listen, if you don't want this, whatever this is turning out to be, just tell me."

Michael followed suit. "It's not that. It's not that at all."

"Then what is it?" she asked, impatience creeping into the tone of her voice.

"A few years ago I had a rather unique experience. I went back in time while pursuing a wanted criminal," he began.

She nodded slowly. "You went after the man who killed your brother. I was there remember? I was the one who gave you the evidence to find him. And I read your report after."

"There were things I didn't put in the report."

She gave him an expectant look.

"I went back to our time at the Academy. It was just after our second year and you had come up to my father's house in Wisconsin."

She nodded "Yes and you're right, I remember now. We kissed. Sitting on a bench outside, watching the sunset. I was giving you a hard time for assuming you had the whole thing set up to seduce me."

"The truth is you were right, it was a set-up. And it worked."

Maya shook her head. "You changed your mind. We kissed but then we stopped. You later introduced me to your girlfriend and I finally understood why nothing ever came of that night."

"But you see, something did. Before I went back, something did. That night turned out very different and our relationship became something else," he said, finding it suddenly quite difficult to look into her eyes as he spoke.

"You're starting to make my head hurt."

"There was another timeline before I went back and it changed. In that timeline things between us were very different because I made an awful mistake that night. I ruined our friendship and I kept seeing you

even though I was in a committed relationship with Jana Tren. Eventually you found out and you never forgave me for it.”

Michael watched her carefully as she turned her back on him and took a few steps towards the far bulkhead. “That’s a lot to take in.”

“Now do you understand why I’ve been feeling so awkward all this time?”

“Let me try to get this straight. There was another timeline where you cheated with me on your girlfriend and I ended up hating your guts,” she said and turned around to face him again, a noticeable gap now between them.

He nodded.

“Then you went back in time and fixed it?”

“It kind of happened that way, yes. It wasn’t planned.”

She offered a humorless smile. “I would think the Department of Temporal Investigations would seriously frown on people using time travel to ease their conscience.”

“Must be why I never told them about that particular event.”

Maya rubbed her temples with her thumb and index finger, clearly still having trouble fully appreciating his confession. “Here’s what I don’t understand,” she said. “From what you’re saying all this cheating and lying happened in a different timeline, one that nobody remembers. So why tell me this now?”

“Because I remember, Maya,” he said and took one small step towards her, but not yet confident enough to come any closer. “I wish to God that I didn’t but I do. I remember everything.”

She considered those words for a moment before reciprocating with her own exploratory step. “There’s supposed to be a whole other universe out there where we all exist but in twisted, evil versions of ourselves. There is the multi-verse theory which says that there is a parallel universe for each decision we may have made in our lifetime. So presumably there are versions of us right now where I killed you in a jealous fury, maybe even one where we’ve gotten married and have children together. I don’t see why any of that should stop us from living our lives the way we see fit.”

“I just needed you to know about it.”

She smiled and closed the gap between them. “Well, now that that’s off your chest, where were we?” she said and kissed him again.

“And by the way,” she said after a minute or so when their lips had parted once more. “If you do ever cheat on *me*, I will kill you in a jealous fury. Just keep that mind for any future time travel excursions.”

- IV -

Michael Owens stifled a yawn as he looked over the padd in his ready room.

It had been a long day and the only reason he was still up was because *Eagle* was mere minutes away from entering the Aphrodite nebula, one of the most mesmerizing and remarkable spatial phenomena in the quadrant. Due to the high background radiation prevalent in the beautiful, multi-colored cloud, and because standard shielding could not adequately protect a crew for long, no manned vessel had ever entered the nebula for any prolonged period. Even unmanned probes had not survived longer than a few hours within its hostile environment.

However thanks to some ingenious shield modifications by Professor Erez Rosenthal, a man often credited as the inventor of multiphasic deflectors now standard on all Starfleet vessels, *Eagle* would be able to safely operate within the nebula for up to ten days and complete the construction on a long-range sensor array.

No, it wasn't an exploratory mission in the grand Starfleet tradition which seemed almost forgotten after over a year of fighting an uncertain war. But it was the closest *Eagle* would get to one in what he feared a very long time.

And if the spy array worked as Professor Rosenthal had advertised, they'd also be able to give Starfleet a significant edge in the war effort.

But for now Michael entertained a different proposal by his sedulous first officer. One of many she had brought to him since permanently joining his crew three months earlier.

She stood in front of his desk as he scanned that padd, he'd asked her to relax a number of times but she remained as stiff as a board. "As you can see I have already run this by department heads and most agree that this will increase efficiency across all personnel on *Eagle*."

The captain glanced up at her. "Most?" he said with a smirk. "Any dissenters?"

The red-haired Trill frowned. "Lieutenant Nora feels that the current shift arrangements are sufficient for the security department.

But she's the only hold out. I'm sure I can make her see the rationale of a four-shift rotation."

Michael doubted this very much. The lost love between his fiery Bajoran security chief and Commander Star was well known on the ship. And rationale had very little to do with the two women's feud.

"Mmm," was his only comment as he glanced back at the padd, keeping himself purposefully uncommitted.

"This setup worked very well for me on the—" she interrupted herself. "On my previous assignment," she added after a short pause.

The captain didn't miss the fact that she couldn't say the name of her previous ship. That fateful assignment that had ended in such disaster that it had very nearly axed her Starfleet career. Star had served as the captain of the *Sacajawea* for only four months before she lost it all after going rogue and trying to apprehend a dangerous and wanted criminal by herself. That mission had gone sideways and she not only lost the man she had gone after but also her entire team. Many also blamed her for a number of casualties on two other starships which had attempted to stop her.

She had served six months of a five-year sentence at the Starfleet Stockade at Jaros III before being released due to the outbreak of the Dominion war and reinstated as a commander in the Border Service. After she had decided to break with her unscrupulous intelligence boss who had arranged for her to be temporarily assigned as *Eagle's* acting first officer, he had found a way to make the assignment permanent as a punishment.

After Owens had agreed to give her a chance to prove herself, she had made it clear to him that she'd do whatever it would take to redeem herself as a Starfleet officer and she certainly had worked hard since she had made that vow.

And yet something Amaya had said kept teetering on the edge of his mind. "*When it comes down to it, when everything is on the line, your ship, your crew, the people you care about most, do you trust her? I mean completely trust her?*"

Michael decided it was too late to ponder those questions now and looked up at the expectant face of his controversial XO. "Tell you what, I look this over tonight and we'll discuss this first thing in the morning. 0900 okay for you?"

"Yes, sir."

“Good,” he said and placed the padd on his desk. “Now, how are our civilian engineers settling in?”

“They’ve practically thrown themselves into work,” she said. “Hardly even exchanged pleasantries. According to Professor Rosenthal, he and his people will have hardly enough time to sleep in order to finish that array by their deadline.”

“Hopkins giving them all the support they need?”

She nodded. “She’s got an entire taskforce of engineers ready to work at the project around the clock,” she said. “But our chief engineer seems a little disappointed that she isn’t being consulted more.”

Michael stood. “I’m sure she’ll get over it. Besides nothing good ever came out of putting too many geniuses in one room,” he said as he headed for the doors. “You’d be able to measure the ego with a tricorder.”

Star followed the captain to the bridge where they found their chief science officer smartly getting out of the captain’s chair. “Sir, I was about to contact you. We are three minutes and forty seconds from dropping out of warp at the edge of the Aphrodite nebula.”

“Excellent. And I see I’m not the only one staying up for the occasion,” said Owens.

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. “Using a manned spacecraft to enter the Aphrodite nebula is a significant scientific event in astrophysical research. The discoveries we may make here could help us make important advances in understanding the composition of certain stellar phenomena.”

“Do I hear passion in your voice, Commander?” said Star with a smirk.

“That would be improbable, sir.”

Owens and Star exchanged a quick smile before the captain took a seat. “Let’s put it on the big screen, shall we?”

Xylion quickly moved to his science station at the aft part of the bridge.

A swirling mass of crimson, emerald and azure, all mixed into one extensive cloud, appeared on the main view screen. Aphrodite was different to other nebulas by its relatively small size. It was only a few light-years wide at its most expansive point and even though colorful and bright, it was actually not very well visible from a distance and

without powerful sensors due to it being surrounded by especially heavy concentrations of dark matter.

One of its most impressive characteristics and the main reason it had been given its name, were those multi-colored twinkling lights which popped up at seemingly random intervals all over the cloud. It reminded Michael of Christmas lights and he quickly realized that it was a quite mesmerizing show. After the nebula had appeared on the screen, every set of eyes on the bridge had been drawn to it and now watched the spectacle in awe.

It wasn't until the aft turbolift opened, disgorging half a dozen men and women, speaking in fast and hectic voices that the quiet spell was broken.

Michael rose from his chair to see who had intruded onto his bridge in such a brazen manner.

"Professor Rosenthal, may I present Captain Owens," said Tazla Star once she had spotted the scientist among the civilian team having stepped out of the turbolift.

Rosenthal was man of middle age, fifty-five, maybe sixty, with high cheekbones, thinning dark hair and a pointed chin beard. He wore an old-fashioned brown, three piece suit made out of cotton but perhaps most unconventional were those round eyeglasses sitting on his large nose.

"A pleasure, I'm sure," said the engineer as he stepped down the ramp to head towards the command area of the bridge.

Michael reached out to shake the man's hand. "Welcome aboard, *Eagle*, Professor. We're all very excited to have you onboard. I didn't realize you needed access to the bridge tonight."

"Ah, thank you, Captain," he said. "I apologize for the intrusion, I do understand how sacred Starfleet considers their command centers but it really is the best place to ensure my shield modifications are correctly calibrated before we enter the nebula."

Owens offered an easy smile. "I wouldn't say sacred, Professor. Just a little heads up would have been nice."

"That's my fault, I'm afraid," said a woman who quickly stepped up next to Rosenthal.

"Please allow me to introduce my chief advisor on this project, Miss Colcord," said Rosenthal.

Michael shook hands with the attractive blonde woman who he couldn't help but think was a little too young to be an advisor to an engineer of Rosenthal's acclaim. He thought he saw her flinch a little at being called an advisor but it was late and he may have misread her. "Nice making your acquaintance."

"Likewise. And thank you for hosting us on your fine vessel. Again my apologies," she said in a rapid-fire tone which he found difficult to follow. "Liaising with your crew is my job on this project and therefore it was my oversight to not inform you of our intentions of attending the bridge. We've had very little time to prepare the shield modifications since coming over from the *Agamemnon*."

"Well, yes, I understand," he said, his mind still spinning slightly at the pace of those words coming over her lips. "And by all means my bridge is yours. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you, Captain. In fact we would greatly appreciate if you could drop us out of warp as soon as possible to give us the time we need to finish the shield modifications," she said.

"Naturally," he said and turned to his first officer. "Commander?"

Star nodded smartly and then turned to the helm where an alluring, caramel-skinned Risian woman was handling things during gamma shift. "Ensign Aliris, drop to impulse."

"Aye, sir."

The ship decelerated out of warp not a second later.

"How long until we reach the threshold at this speed?" Star asked.

Rachel Milestone, a petite brunette and the nightshift's operations manager responded quickly. "Forty-three minutes, sir."

Michael turned to look at Rosenthal and Colcord.

"That'll give us the time we need, thank you, Captain," said Rosenthal just before he and his advisor joined the rest of their team which had practically taken over the aft stations of the bridge.

For the next forty minutes the bridge crew remained at their posts while the civilian engineering team was hard at work, walking back and forth between the various aft stations, reading out status updates, shield frequencies and liaising with their remaining colleagues in engineering and deflector control even while the magnificent Aphrodite nebula steadily grew larger on the screen.

"Captain, with your permission we are now ready to engage the transphasic shielding," Rosenthal finally announced.

"By all means, Professor, please go ahead."

"Initiate the main deflector and get ready to activate the transphasic emitter," Rosenthal said which immediately prompted another flurry of activity.

"Deflector engaged and running at optimal operational output."

"Transphasic emitter within standard parameter."

"Powering shield grid."

Owens had made his way to the aft science station, careful to stay out of the engineers' way. He found Xylion working on his console and leaned in next to him, momentarily studying the readings on his screen. "I may not have read the mission briefing as carefully as I should have. What's a transphasic shield, Commander?" he said, keeping his voice low enough to hopefully not out himself as an ignoramus in front of Rosenthal and his team.

"A fairly new concept in deflector shield technology first proposed by Professor Rosenthal three years ago, it is based on frequencies which shift approximately every 10.4 picoseconds, allowing the shields to momentarily exist in an asymmetric superposition of multiple phase states. This in turn allows the shields to deflect certain types of radiation, including thermionic radiation prevalent in the Aphrodite nebula."

Owens nodded. He didn't have a strong science background but he could understand the basic concept. The shields would keep his ship and crew safe, that was all he really needed to know.

"The truly groundbreaking technology here is the level of miniaturization," said Rosenthal who may not have overheard the question but hadn't missed the Vulcan's answer. He turned to look at the captain and took the moment to remove his eyeglasses and clean the lenses with a cloth he kept in one of his suit's many pockets. "The emitter itself is, well just about the sizes of my spectacles here and still powerful enough to protect the entire ship by utilizing the existing shield grid. This will allow us to use the same shield technology on shuttles, workbees and even EVA suits while we construct the sensor array."

"Professor, the transphasic shield is running at 97.8 percent power and is now stable," Colcord said.

"Excellent, Charlie," he said and looked back at the captain. "At your leisure, sir."

Michael gave the man a curt nod and headed back towards his seat. "Distance to nebula threshold?"

"250,000 kilometers," said Milestone.

"Ensign Aliris, get us to the threshold at full impulse and then slow to one quarter to take us in nice and easy," he said and took his seat again.

"Yes, sir, increasing to full impulse," the Risian said enthusiastically.

After that it didn't take them long to get there.

"20,000 kilometers to threshold," said Aliris. "Slowing to one quarter impulse. Two minutes until we enter the nebula."

"Captain, even with the transphasic shielding we can expect to encounter strong spatial turbulence while we cross the outer periphery," the science officer said, "I recommend we transfer auxiliary power to inertial dampers."

Owens nodded. "You heard the man, Ensign."

"Transferring power," Milestone confirmed.

Not a few moments later *Eagle* encountered the promised turbulence like a ship entering rough waters. Michael couldn't help but be reminded of the play they had watched earlier in the day and hoped that their travels would fare much better.

"Now passing nebula threshold," Ensign Milestone said.

"And down the rabbit hole we go," said Star.

Michael found that to be an apt metaphor and didn't regret his decision to stay up late to watch *Eagle* slip into the Aphrodite nebula. It was Wonderland indeed. While the nebula had looked spectacular from afar, it was even more amazing seeing it from the inside. The many multicolored lights were revealed to be countless specks of varying size and ever changing shades as they swirled around the ship. Some just by themselves while others seemed to be traveling in seemingly synchronous formations not unlike swarms of fish under the sea.

Every few seconds, kilometer-long strands floating through the nebula would spontaneously erupt in a bright flash and quickly burn themselves out again, creating a never ending series of spatial fireworks.

"Its absolutely gorgeous," said Aliris.

"Never seen anything like it," agreed Milestone next to her.

Star caught the large smile plastered on the captain's face. "Sir?"

He aimed that grin right at her. "It's been a long time since we could say that we've gone where no man has gone before."

"Sir, I must point out that we are not the first manned spacecraft known to have entered this nebula," said Xylion. "While we may be the first Federation vessel able to withstand the radiation for a period of time, other starships have —"

"Commander, it's the sentiment that counts," said Owens, interrupting the Vulcan. "Now how about we just enjoy the view?"

Xylion cocked an eyebrow. "Indeed, sir."

After a while their ride noticeably smoothed out as *Eagle* traveled away from the turbulent periphery and deeper into the cloud.

"Transphasic shields are operating as expected and remain stable," said Rosenthal. "At the current level of decay we should remain safe from the radiation for ten to eleven days."

"Well done, Professor," said Owens.

A myriad of sensor alarms from tactical and operations interrupted the serene tranquility which had gripped the bridge.

Star was out of her chair in an instant. "Report."

"I don't know what's going on," a flustered Milestone said as her fingers rushed over her controls. "I'm reading multiple fires all over the ship."

"Fires?" Star said as if to make sure she'd heard that right.

Milestone nodded. "Also reading loss of atmosphere on deck five, section twelve and failure of life support on deck nine though twelve."

"Captain, I believe I can explain," said Xylion. "While external sensors have been calibrated for the interference caused by the nebula's background radiation, internal sensors have not and are therefore providing us with unreliable readings."

"Can we recalibrate them as well?" asked Star.

Rosenthal stepped forward. "It is possible but it would be rather time and resource intensive, two things we are already short of. I recommend that we disable the internal sensors until we have completed our task inside the nebula."

Michael frowned. He didn't remember reading that he would be without internal sensors during this mission. They weren't crucial to operating the ship but without them it be difficult to find out if something went wrong.

Rosenthal seemed to notice the captain's reluctance. "I assure you that all critical ship systems will not be affected."

Owens glanced at his science officer who nodded in agreement. "There will be sufficient redundancy systems to monitor critical systems."

"Alright," he said and turned to ops, "Ensign, disable internal sensors but make a note in your station's log that I want hourly reports on all critical systems."

"Aye, sir. Disabling internal sensors and making note in log."

The captain glanced back at the stunning light show on the screen and then tugged down on his uniform jacket. "That's enough excitement for me tonight," he said and glanced at his first officer. "We'll have plenty of time to appreciate Aphrodite for the next ten days."

She responded with a nod. "I've switched shifts with Commander Leva so I'll stay on the bridge to keep an eye on things."

Michael tried to figure out if Star had decided to head Gamma shift to continue to admire the nebula or if she had alternative motives. Something told him the latter to be true. "Have it your way, Commander, but I'm going to get me some shut eye. I'll see you in the morning."

"Have a good night, sir."

* * *

Back in his quarters, Michael stripped out of his uniform, took a quick sonic shower and quietly appreciated the beauty of the nebula from his the large forward facing panoramic windows. He observed as numerous specks of brightly colored light made contact with the modified deflector shield and then fizzled out with a little burst, almost like raindrops against a windshield. Albeit in much more spectacular fashion.

Then he went to bed with a little bit of light reading, in this case Commander Star's report on improving crew efficiency by transitioning to a four shift rotation.

But after only a few sentences he found his thoughts drifting off to his too short encounter with Amaya earlier. He was glad he had been

able to finally talk to her about a mistake which had haunted him for so long and now seemed like it had happened a lifetime ago. And she had taken the revelation in stride, not letting it affect her feelings for him in the least. On the contrary, judging by what they had done afterwards. They didn't have nearly as much time together as he would have liked as both ships had to rush of to their next missions.

Michael hated the uncertainty of ever being able to see her again but then again that was the nature of their chosen lives, war times or not, and neither of them had regretted what had taken place between them.

He had no idea where this unconventional relationship could lead, if it had a future or, for the matter, if any of them had a future at all.

He decided not to dwell on those depressing thoughts and instead simply appreciated how much he had enjoyed her company and how he would enjoy seeing her again.

Michael closed his eyes for just a moment and not surprisingly immediately visualized her beautiful, smiling face.

"Star to Captain Owens."

Michael opens his eyes and sighed. His new first officer desperately needed to take a break, he thought. "What is it, Commander?" he said, unable to keep his annoyance out of his voice.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir," she said, his irritation had clearly registered. *"But I thought you might want to go through that report about the shift transitions."*

He couldn't quite believe his ears. "In the morning, Commander. 0900 hours, remember?"

A pregnant pause followed. *"Sir, it's 1120 now."*

"What are you talking about?" he grunted, swung his legs over the side of the bed and activated the chronometer only to find that she was absolutely right.

Day Two: The Getaway

- I -

DeMara Deen found Xylion in *Eagle's* main science lab where he seemed hard at work at one of the computer stations and surrounded by a myriad of well-organized padds.

"Reporting as ordered," she said as she stepped into the lab and gave the chief science officer a snappy salute.

Xylion raised an eyebrow at the gesture. "You are mistaken if you believe I ordered you here."

She offered a little smirk. "'Lieutenant Deen'," she said, putting on her best Xylion voice, "'please report to the main science lab as soon as possible.' Sure sounded like an order to me."

He considered her with curiosity. Clearly it wasn't often that other officers pretended to speak with his voice. Deen almost expected him to deny that her approximation of his tone was even close to accurate.

"I apologize if you were under the impression you were ordered here."

She waved him off. "That's alright, I didn't have anything better to do anyway," she said and approached his workstation. "What are you working on?"

"I have initiated a full spectrum survey of the Aphrodite nebula."

Deen immediately began to study the screen. "Fascinating," she said and then shot him a mischievous little look. "To borrow one of your lines."

The empty look on his face made it clear that even after over three years on *Eagle*, he didn't really get her humor.

She focused on the screen again. "These must be the most detailed scans anyone has ever taken of Aphrodite," she said as she studied the screen. "Look at the high density of particle flux. This looks almost like a still forming protostellar nebula and not an inversion nebula as we previously assumed," she said. Even though Deen served as an operations officer on *Eagle*, she had started her Starfleet career as a scientist. She had switched tracks only after Michael Owens had been

unable to convince Starfleet to install the young and seemingly inexperienced woman as *Eagle's* chief science officer when he had first put his crew together. However it was rare that she regretted those turn of events and she'd had been given plenty of opportunities over the years to pursue her original passion.

"My preliminary analysis suggests that Aphrodite exhibits enough unique characteristics that it could be classified as an entirely new nebula category. However additional study is required in order to determine a categorization in line with currently established scientific parameters."

"A brand new kind of nebula?" she said, her voice having taken on a tone of reverence. It wasn't everyday a scientist got to discover something that had never been seen before. "Have you tried probes to get better data?"

Xyilion quickly brought up the logs detailing his efforts so far. "I have deployed a class-II sensor probe as well a class-IV stellar encounter probe. Both provided only minimal new data before full systems failure brought on by thermionic radiation approximately two minutes and thirty-eight seconds after launch."

She nodded understandingly. "It's not an ideal environment for probes. Did you run a high-energy proton spectrometry scan?"

"Yes, with inconclusive results."

"How about a graviton –"

"Lieutenant, I appreciate your input," he said. "However I did not ask you here to suggest alternative means to study the nebula."

"Oh?"

"I require your assistance in securing additional resources to continue my work."

"I see," she said, putting on a mock frown. "I'm not a good enough scientist to assist you. I'm just a good enough ops techie."

A raised eyebrow mirrored the Vulcan's confusion. "I am not certain how you have come to interpret my request in that manner."

She offered a brilliant smile before planting herself down in front of the workstation next to his. "Relax, Commander, just pulling your leg. You need an ops officer and I'm an ops officer. Good enough fit, if you ask me," she said before she stretched out her fingers dramatically in front of her. "Tell me what you need and I shall work my wonders."

"I require full access to the lateral sensor pallet. Specifically the hydrogen-filter subspace scanner and the low-frequency EM flux sensors."

"Alright, let's see what we can do," she said and began tapping away at the console. But after just a few moments she began to frown in earnest. "Looks like the entire lateral array has been locked down to be used by engineering to assist in their construction efforts."

"Can we utilize pallet six and the virtual particle mapping camera?"

But Deen quickly shook her head in frustration. "Also repurposed by engineering. Same goes for the wide-angle EM radiation scanner, the quark population analysis counter and the steerable lifeform analysis cluster."

The Vulcan offered a minimalistic nod. "I have assumed as much."

"I suppose there are things that trump scientific research," said the purple-eyed Tenarian.

"Indeed. Certainly war and the preservation of life and our freedom fall into that category."

"I know," she shot back. "But it's all so frustrating. We are losing such an amazing opportunity here," she said and uttered a heavy sigh. "The only thing war has ever done is throw us back decades in real scientific and exploratory progress. That and killing millions of people."

"I do not disagree, Lieutenant," said the science officer. "However, logic suggests that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

"Vulcan wisdom," she said. "Where would we be without it?"

Xylion had nothing to say to that.

Deen stood and her face brightened with a new idea. "But what if the few could manage to slip away and get out of the many's hair altogether?"

Intrigued, the Vulcan's eyebrow once again climbed for the ceiling.

- II -

"I know what you're thinking, Captain. You think that I'm a difficult, hardheaded old-man who is looking at one last chance to have a space adventure before he's cast aside and mothballed for good."

"That's not at all what I—"

But Doctor Elijah Katanga didn't give Michael Owens a chance to speak. "And you're probably absolutely right. I haven't served on a starship since I was a chief researcher on the *Billroth* back in '53, I think. Could've been '55."

"'54 actually," said Tazla Star who stood to one side in Owens' ready room while observing the captain and the ship's new chief medical officer's conversation.

Katanga turned to look up at the red-haired Trill who offered a wide smile in return. The doctor didn't seem quite sure what to make of that. "Yes, of course. Thank you, my dear."

She nodded helpfully.

Katanga turned to face the captain again who was sitting opposite him behind his desk. "In any case, just because it has been a while since I've been on a starship, doesn't mean that I don't know my way around a sickbay anymore."

"Doctor, nobody here is suggesting that you don't know what you're doing. In fact we are all very honored to have you onboard."

"A lot of folks seem to be under the impression that space travel is a right reserved for the young," he continued, almost as if the captain hadn't spoken at all. "But we are too quick to forget that the real trailblazer to the stars were men and women of my generation. And we still have plenty to offer."

Michael began to rub his forehead, Maya's warnings coming back to the forefront of his mind. "And I would never suggest otherwise."

"I'm glad to hear that, Captain. Very glad indeed," he said and offered a grandfatherly smile, revealing rows of white teeth which stood in contrast to his dark skin. "Than you will have no objections with me spending time on the bridge."

"The bridge?"

“Well, yes of course,” he said. “I won’t be able to share my extensive wisdom with you and the crew on a regular basis if I’m hiding myself away in sickbay all the time.”

“Doctor Wenera preferred —”

“Oh yes,” Katanga said, interrupting Owens again. “I know all about how Jane liked to run things. And don’t get me wrong, she’s a very capable physician, in fact one of the most dedicated doctors I’ve ever had the pleasure working with. But she also had a tendency to close herself off and keep her thoughts to herself. As you can tell, that’s not like me at all.”

“I think that much is obvious,” offered Star again who continued to be greatly amused even though neither Owens nor Katanga could tell exactly why.

“I don’t think I would call Doctor Wenera closed,” said Michael, vividly remembering her inquisitive nature and her tendency to question things on a nearly constant basis.

At that Katanga grinned. “Well, I’ve worked on her over the years. I’m glad it shows.”

“Back to what you were saying about —”

“Me being on the bridge,” he said quickly, completely missing the captain’s frown at being interrupted yet again. “As my dear old friend Leonard McCoy used to say, you can’t very well make a difference if you’re not standing up for what’s right,” he said and then considered his own words for a moment. “At least I think Bones said that. I could be mistaken.”

“Listen, Doctor, if you like to be on the bridge from time to time, that’s perfectly fine. As long as you understand that there are certain rules and protocols we like to —”

“My dear Captain,” said Katanga as he stood. “I helped write half of those rules and protocols so you don’t have to worry about me not fitting in.”

“Talking about fitting in,” said Michael, now trying hard not to show his frustration at not being allowed to finish a sentence in his own ready room. “I’ve noticed that your uniform is not exactly standard issue.”

Katanga was still wearing his blue medical shirt without the gray-shouldered jacket which usually came with it.

"Tell you the truth, Captain, I've never been a great fan of uniforms. Always seems so needlessly militaristic to me."

"The idea of a uniform is for everyone to look ... well uniform," Michael said.

"Of course that's the idea, Captain," he said. "Anyway, if you don't mind I really should be heading back to sickbay now. I have plenty of work left to do down there to get things organized. Not that Jane hasn't done a great job with the place and the staff."

"By all means, Doctor. And again, welcome aboard *Eagle*."

"Thank you, Captain. I have a feeling we will get on just fine," he said and then aimed a look at Star who was still smiling at him. "Commander," he added, his confusion at her smirking face still not entirely dispelled, before he headed out of the doors.

After Katanga had left the room fell silent for a moment as neither Owens nor Star spoke up straight away.

"He's quite something, isn't he?" the first officer finally said.

Michael threw her a look.

"I know he likes the sound of his own voice but the man's practically a legend," she said. "He has single handedly revolutionized modern medicine and quite possibly helped shape Starfleet into what it is today."

"And how much leeway exactly are we willing to extend to a living legend, Commander?"

She took a step closer to his desk. "I can speak to him about that if you wish. Katanga and I have some history."

The captain looked suspicious. "He didn't seem to recognize you."

"In his defense, I didn't quite look like this last time we met," she said.

Owens understood the implication. "Anything you could do to help ease Doctor Katanga's transition onto a modern starship would be greatly appreciated."

Star smirked again. "Leave it with me, sir."

- III -

The dream had become all too familiar by now.

Even though the details were never the same, the theme never changed. She was running up what began as nothing more than a little slope but turned steeper and steeper with each bound until it became a mountainous incline, impossible to overcome.

She knew she needed to get to the peak, that her life depended on reaching it but without spontaneously sprouting wings, her chances of getting there equaled zero. Instead she would slip, like she did every time.

She didn't scream as she fell and the darkness engulfed her, almost as if she had gotten used to her own failures. As if they had become a part of her now.

Tazla Star opened her eyes and felt a sharp pain in her midsection, as if her symbiont was getting ready to burst right through her flesh and skin, trying to forcefully disconnect itself from the host body.

That too she had come to expect.

She threw off the covers and found her tank top drenched in sweat.

"Computer, time," she said as she threw her legs over the edge of the bed and sat up.

"The time is 1358 hours."

She had slept less than two hours. And even after pulling a double shift.

With her elbows resting on her knees and holding her temples, she took a few breaths to try and wait for the pain to go away. It always did after a few minutes. But by then she'd be unable to go back to sleep.

Tazla Star couldn't remember the last time she'd had gotten more than four, maybe five hours of sleep straight. Not because of the stressful demands of her job, not because of fighting a war that seemed to go on forever but because her entire body was out to punish her for the mistakes of her past.

She reached under her bed and found the small safety box. It opened after she entered a combination and she removed the hypospray, considering the device for a moment.

Inside it contained a vial of yridium tricantizine, also known by its street name Syndicate-Y. A drug popular with members of the Orion Syndicate and one she had become addicted to early in her career when a deep-cover assignment had spun out of control.

Accepting the drug to infiltrate the organization hadn't been the first or last mistake of her career but it certainly was amongst the biggest. In fact she was certain that things had taken a desperate turn for the worse after her addiction had kicked in and turned her into a closet junkie, easily manipulated by those who sought her loyalties.

She had tried to come off it before. For a while a substitute drug, less addictive and damaging, had been a promising way to finally kick the habit which was threatening to destroy what little of a life she had left. It hadn't worked out.

Since coming on *Eagle* permanently she had tried to go cold turkey a number of times. Going four or five days, sometimes even a whole week, without a shot. But eventually, when her concentration dipped, the dreams became more vivid and she wouldn't get more than three hours a night, she had no recourse but to go back to her supply.

While eying the tempting hypo in one hand, she felt the octagon-shaped mark on her chest with the other. And while it had healed over the years, the outline was still visible as she had chosen not to treat it and keep it as a constant reminder. The Mark, as it was known by Syndicate members, was a sign of their loyalty and commitment to the organization. It was also the shape left behind by the first Y injection which bounded most of its members to the organization for life.

With the pain in her abdomen almost gone, Star drew one large breath and placed the hypo back into the box, closed it and pushed it under her bed again. She'd go another day without an injection, she'd managed to convince herself.

Her legs felt rubbery when she stood but at least the sweats had stopped. She hoped a thorough sonic shower would get her ready for another long day. And perhaps this time it would tire her out enough to get back to five hours of sleep.

Afterwards and dressed in a fresh uniform, she aimed a furtive glance at the windows of her quarters to be greeted by the unusual sight of hundreds of different color splotches vying for dominance as they impacted against *Eagle's* shields. Most of the crew, she knew, found this spectacle to be mesmerizingly beautiful. To her it only reminded her of

one of her more vivid Syndicate-Y trips and she couldn't stand looking at it for longer than a few seconds.

She swiftly left her quarters.

She had barely set foot on deck twelve when she heard the Vulcan science officer call out her name.

The first officer slowed to allow him to catch up with her more easily.

"Mister Xylion," she said in acknowledgment as he stepped up to her and matched her pace. "How can I be of assistance today?" she added, aiming a tiny smile his way. She was quite proud of how chummy she managed to sound considering how little sleep she'd gotten. Then she realized that this was mostly lost on the Vulcan.

"I have a request to make."

"Shoot."

He considered her for a brief moment with puzzlement as if her response had been a complete non sequitur to his query. But apparently his sharp Vulcan mind quickly processed the true meaning of her words. "As you may be aware," he started, "this is the first opportunity a manned Starfleet vessel has had to enter this nebula without being affected by the heavy radiation which is toxic to most humanoid races."

"I am indeed," she said and hoped he'd get to the point soon. No matter how much she pretended to be in an agreeable mood, the Vulcan was the one person on board who'd easily be able to test her patience and threaten her with a headache.

"You may also be aware that our only studies of this spatial phenomena have been limited to automated probes and even those were unable to yield a significant amount of data before they succumbed to this hostile environment."

"I can sense where this is going."

"It would be a great disservice to the interest of science and our efforts to better understand our own galaxy if we did not take full opportunity of our current circumstances and attempted to learn more about Aphrodite's Cloud."

She thought he sounded unnecessarily dramatic about the whole thing. "Run your scans then," she said. "We'll be here for at least ten days. That should give you plenty of time to do some in-depth studying."

“Regretfully most of the equipment I would require in order to study the nebula is currently reserved for the engineering team’s efforts to construct the observation array.”

She nodded. “I see the problem.”

“And I appreciate that at this time, the construction of the array has to take priority over all scientific considerations, especially since it may give us a significant advantage in the war against the Dominion.”

Star came to a stop in front of the doors leading to sickbay and turned to the Vulcan. Had he not just answered his own request, she wondered. “And you would be right about that,” she said. “Further scientific study of the nebula will have to wait for another time, I’m afraid.”

“Not necessarily.” He handed her a padd.

She glanced at it and to her dismay realized that the science officer had written a fifty-page report on the benefits of a one-week study of Aphrodite. She got to the middle of the first page before she made the decision that there was no way in hell she’d read the entire thing. She looked back up at him. “Commander, while I appreciate your point, as well as this,” she waved the padd, “what I can only assume is a compelling – if not comprehensive – report, you have pretty much already summed up the reasons why it’s something we can simply not consider at the moment.”

“If you would like to refer to page sixteen, section nine-alpha, you will find that I have proposed a solution which I believe would resolve that very issue without interfering with our current mission.”

Star found the page but then quickly realized that the section he had referred to went on for about ten pages. “Why don’t you just give me the abbreviated version?”

“The runabout could be easily equipped with Professor Rosenthal’s transphasic shielding and allow us to enter deeper into the nebula and carry out observations we’d be unable to complete on *Eagle* due to our current mission profile.”

Star sighed and tried to give the report another shot. Once again she gave up quickly.

“I would only require a small amount of volunteers to assist me in modifying the *Nebuchadrezzar* and accompany me on the away mission.”

Star sighed and eventually returned the padd to the Vulcan. “You find those volunteers and you’ve got yourself an away mission,” she

said. "But I expect this to last not a minute longer than seven days. I want you back on *Eagle* with plenty of time to spare before we are due to depart."

"That should not be a problem, sir," he said and then quickly left, no doubt to get his away team assembled and begin the required modifications.

- IV -

Star entered sickbay and after a quick survey she found the person she was looking for in his office. She stepped up to the doorframe and leaned casually against it while considering the ebony-skinned doctor sitting behind his desk. It took him a few moments to realize that he was being watched.

"Commander," he said as he aimed a furtive glance at the Trill woman before returning to his work. "How can I help you?"

"Has it really been that long?"

Katanga looked up again, a clearly puzzled look on his face now.

She simply returned it with a smile. "I understand that the package has changed a bit."

"The ... package?" the doctor said with confusion evident in his tone.

"Well, yes, I'd say this one is at least 20 kilos lighter, with fairer skin and, oh yeah, the curves."

"Commander, I am not quite sure what you are trying to ..." he stopped himself as she began to walk into the room with her emerald colored eyes sparkling like diamonds. "My God, I know that look," he said as he stood.

"I'm glad you recognize something, even though you'd think the name would have been a dead giveaway."

"Dezwin?" he said, a huge grin now forming on his dark, bearded face as he began to round his desk.

She shook her head. "Not any more. I go by Tazla these days."

"Dear Lord, I didn't even know," he said and quickly hugged the first officer. When he let her go again, he took another good look at the Trill, studying the attractive woman in front of him from head-to-toe. "You changed," he said with a dry grin.

"You can say that."

"You know it never occurred to me. Not even once, that you could be Dezwin. Or should I say, have been Dezwin. I suppose I always thought of you ... of him, as Dezwin Sigus and not Star. It never registered with me that you have the same name."

She nodded. "It can get a little confusing."

The doctor sat against the edge of his desk as he continued to consider the woman in front of him who had just been revealed as a dear friend of his a long time ago. "My God, Dezwin Sigus, now Tazla Star. What a crazy galaxy we live in, huh? I see you've decided to pursue a different career path."

"The joining affects us all in different ways."

He nodded. "I recall. Dezwin couldn't wait to leave Starfleet after it happened to him, frustrated by the sluggish manner in which the upper echelons responded to medical emergencies throughout the galaxy. Even after he helped me set up MAAP," Katanga said, referring to the Medical Assistance and Advisory Program which Dezwin and Katanga had created within Starfleet Medical as an interstellar agency to assist with medical crisis throughout the galaxy.

"Same thing happened to me," Tazla said. "I felt my drive and determination double almost overnight after I had joined with the Star symbiont. Suddenly I just couldn't become a captain fast enough."

Katanga's features darkened noticeably. Like many others in the fleet, he too had heard about the exploits of Captain Star and her subsequent downfall. But until now he had never made the connection. "Things didn't quite go the way you had hoped."

She shook her head sadly. "No, they certainly didn't."

Katanga stood and put a hand on her shoulder, adopting an almost grandfatherly smile. "I don't know what happened to you that led to the things that ultimately took place. I don't know the details or the circumstances but I know Dezwin. Hell, I probably knew him better than he knew himself. I have to believe that whatever you did, your intentions were pure. You tried to do the right thing but sometimes, no matter how hard we try, in the end it just doesn't work out that way."

She looked pained. "I'm not entirely sure I deserve your absolution."

"I do and that's all that matters, you understand," he said, his tone taking on a sharper edge. "Yes, I'm sure you've made mistakes and if you could go back you'd probably do things differently now. But that's not a luxury we have. From what I've heard you were duly punished for your transgressions. Now is the time to put this behind you and focus on how you can be a better person moving forward. I know Dezwin knew how to do that, so do you."

Tazla looked almost grateful at the unconditional trust her old friend was willing to place. It had been the first time since Michael Owens had decided to take a gamble on her and allowed her to stay onboard as his first officer that anyone had shown this kind of faith in her. It was refreshing. "Thank you. This really means a lot to me, Eli."

"Nonsense," he said quickly. "You don't need me to tell you any of this," he said and tapped her stomach. "All you need to know is right there. If you are in doubt, just go talk to Dezwin, he'll tell you."

She smirked. "Doesn't quite work like that," she said. Even though it was probably close enough. Those memories after all were still part of her. And the symbiont had his ways to communicate when it wanted to. "But I'm really glad you came here. I think I could really use a friend. It's not been easy."

"I've noticed this crew is a little wound up."

"I suppose the war is part of that. They've lost some of their own and gone through a couple really tough missions. And they don't trust me."

"I didn't get that impression," said the doctor. "The captain seemed to be quite comfortable with having you around."

She quickly shook her head. "Let me tell you, appearance are deceiving. Yes, he made the decision to keep me around and I'll always be thankful for getting this second chance, but he's not comfortable with me at all. He's been keeping me on the tightest of leashes ever since I came aboard. He practically looks over my shoulder twenty-four seven and to be honest, I'm scared stiff of letting him down."

The doctor looked at her for a moment. "None of that sounds like a particularly healthy relationship."

Star sighed and then turned to take a few steps towards the wall before turning back to her old friend. "There might be something that could change all that."

Katanga looked suspicious. "I remember that tone of voice," he said. "It's just like Dezwin used to sound when he came up with one of his rather foolhardy ideas of his."

"I think there is a spy on the ship."

He sighed heavily. "Oh God, I knew this wasn't going to be pretty."

"Hear me out on this. I don't have any proof yet. Nothing concrete that I could show the captain. It really just boils down to a couple of suspicious transmissions and a gut feeling."

"I don't like where this is going."

She stepped closer. "Let's assume for the moment that I'm right. I'll let the captain in on this now and he'll probably dismiss it for lack of evidence. But if I'm right, and if I can find out who it is and expose him or her, the captain will have no choice but to start trusting me with my duties. And before long the crew will fall in line."

"Dez, this is a terrible idea."

"I need to do something. Right now I'm nothing more than an afterthought on this ship. And at first that was enough for me. Better than to run away from Starfleet and drown myself in Saurian brandy in some faraway sector of space. I need to be more than that. I owe it to Owens to be the best first officer to him and his crew that I can be."

"And you think keeping secrets from him will achieve this?"

She sighed. "A gut feeling and two unidentified subspace transmissions which could very well turn out to be nothing more than background noise aren't exactly a secret."

"I still think that this is a bad idea and if you came here to try and let me talk you out of this, let it be known that I've tried."

Tazla shot him a wide grin. "Always looking out for me, huh? I really missed you."

"Well," he said as he sat back behind your desk. "I'll make sure to remind you of this when they throw you back into that stockade."

She could tell immediately that he wasn't being serious. "I can make this work, Eli."

He nodded slowly. "Just be smart about this, alright?"

"Don't worry about me."

"Somebody has to."

She gave him another smile before she headed towards the doors. She stopped halfway there and turned back around, considering her old friend. He still didn't wear the standard-issue uniform jacket over his blue shirt. "By the way, the captain wasn't particularly impressed with your personal dress code and he wanted me to talk to you about that."

"Did you tell him that I'm a stubborn old man?"

She couldn't quite suppress the urge to laugh. "You have to realize that you're not running your own show anymore. You're back on a starship and out here, the captain has the last word."

"I've been dealing with starship captains long before our dear leader was even in diapers. And let me tell you something about them. They all like to think that they command everything and everyone around them. For the most part they are right. But from time to time they need to be reminded that some things will always be out of their control. Trust me, it's healthy. And I should know, I'm a doctor," he said. "Now get out of here before I'll start regretting this happy reunion."

Star chuckled. "Fascinating theory," she said. "How about you tell me more about the galaxy according to Doctor Katanga over dinner tonight? We'll catch up and reminisce about the good old times. 2000?"

"1800. I'm not a spring chicken anymore, you know."

She offered a beaming smile. "It's really good to see you again, old friend," she said just before leaving sickbay.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" she said as she took in the marvelous sight outside the large floor-to-ceiling windows. "That in such dark times full of suffering and ugliness we would get a chance to see something so marvelous and beautiful."

Michael Owens yawned.

Deen aimed an annoyed look at him

"Sorry," he said quickly. "It's not you. And certainly not the amazing view," he added as his glance wandered towards the dancing specters of color just outside the Nest's observation windows. "I just didn't get much sleep last night. In fact, I don't know if I got any sleep at all."

Her features turned into a frown of concern. "What do you mean, you don't know?"

The captain rubbed his forehead, clearly having a difficult time to explain what had happened to him last night. Even to himself. "It's as if I went to sleep and before I even had a chance to dose off, it was the next day already."

"Could this be related to the Hyterian phenomenon?" she asked, referring to an incident in which Owens' mind had inexplicably been linked to a long-dead civilization which had manifested itself through dreams and nightmares.

He shook his head. "I haven't had one of those episodes in nearly two years. It would seem like odd timing if they were back again. Besides I didn't experience any of the Hyterian themes this time. Nothing about light and darkness."

"Do you remember dreaming?"

"That's just the thing, I don't," he said. "Even though I have a nagging feeling that something happened. There are images flying around in the back of my head but they are so fleeting and blurry, I can't make sense of them at all."

DeMara's worry lines deepened.

Michael noticed. "It's probably nothing," he said quickly. "Just a bad dream."

She was not convinced. "That's what you said last time," she said. "You should talk to Counselor Trenira to see if--"

“Commander Xylion,” Owens said when he noticed the Vulcan science officer approach their table, happy to change the subject. “How are you doing today?”

“I am well, thank you, sir,” said Xylion as he came to a halt in front of the table, adopting his usual stiff posture with his hands behind his back.

“Would you like to join us admiring the nebula?” he said with a little smirk.

“Unfortunately that will not be possible,” he said. “I have come to ask for the lieutenant’s assistance.”

Deen stopped frowning at the captain and his not so subtle attempts to end their conversation and looked up at the Vulcan. “Oh?”

“I have obtained permission to put together an away team for a survey mission of the Aphrodite nebula. I have already begun to adapt the *Nebucadrezzar* with the necessary shield modifications and expect to be able to depart within the next few hours. I would greatly appreciate if you would join the away team.”

Her face turned into a beaming smile. “I’d love to.”

The Vulcan acknowledged with a curt nod. “We have been given limited time to complete this survey. I would therefore suggest that you make your preparations as quickly as possible.”

“Of course.”

“Wait a minute,” said Owens. “How exactly did you obtain said permission?”

“Commander Star authorized the away mission,” the Vulcan said with a raised eyebrow. “I assumed she would have informed you of this.”

“She has not.”

“Michael?” Deen said, her voice making it clear that she would not be pleased at all if he threw a wrench into an opportunity for them to study the nebula.

The Vulcan presented a padd. “I have produced a comprehensive report detailing the benefits of this survey mission. Commander Star agreed with the inherent logic of this proposition. If you wish you may review this yourself and I am certain it would alleviate any objections you may feel towards this mission.”

“He has no objections,” said Deen and shot the captain a pointed look. “You don’t have any objections, right?”

He took the padd off the Vulcan but after realizing that it would take him hours to go through the hefty document he handed it back to his science officer, his face mirroring a contemplative expression.

"Commander," said Deen to the Vulcan. "I'll be joining you in the shuttle bay within an hour."

Xylion glanced at the captain with one last look but when he didn't appear to have any further words to offer, he nodded. "That should be sufficient," he said. "Captain," he added before he swiftly exited the Nest.

"I don't like this," he said once the science officer had left.

"Michael, this is an amazing opportunity for us to study Aphrodite in detail. I guarantee there'll be people back at Starfleet Sciences who would give their right hand for this chance."

"I'm not denying that."

"What then?"

When he didn't say anything right away, she thought she knew what troubled him about this mission. "You're upset he went to Star instead of coming to you, is that it? You think she was more likely to green light this than you'd been? If it had really been about that, he would have come to me first to try and get me to talk you into this."

He shook his head. "Xylion? Not a chance. The man is nothing if not by the book. He wouldn't even consider exploiting our friendship for something like that."

"You're probably right."

Michael took a sip from his tonic water. "Star should have checked in with me first before making this decision."

Deen leaned back in her chair with a knowing smile. "That's what this is about, isn't it? Commander Star. Michael, she's the first officer, last time I checked authorizing an away mission falls squarely within her remit."

"Perhaps but she's still new around here. She doesn't really know how things work on *Eagle*. She doesn't understand how I like to run things."

"She's been onboard for four months now," she said. "I'm pretty sure she's got the basics covered."

But the captain did not look convinced at all.

“Let’s face it, Michael, if this had been Gene making the call you wouldn’t have thought twice about this. You still have a trust issue with her.”

“And why shouldn’t I considering her past?”

She leaned forward. “It was your decision to keep her here. You need to start asking yourself why you made that call. If you really can’t find a way to trust her to do her job, you better start thinking about replacing her as your first officer. Otherwise take her off that leash you’ve kept her on ever since she became your permanent XO. You’re not doing yourself or this crew any favors with the current state of things. And if you ask me, it isn’t fair to her,” she said and stood. “Now, if you’d excuse me. I’ve got to go and pack.”

- VI -

The two people DeMara Deen hadn't expect to be part of Xylion's little excursion were So'Dan Leva and their young Andorian beta shift helmsman Srena. The half-Romulan Leva, the ship's chief tactical officer, was usually not the first choice to join an away team as his expertise was most valuable on the bridge during a combat engagement.

"Not many of those to be expected while we're hidden in this nebula, constructing a fancy spy array," he had told her after she had joined the rest of the team in the shuttle bay. "Besides, I don't get nearly enough of a chance to get off the ship. Change of air will do me good."

Srena had been even more excited. The perky Andorian made up for her inexperience with pure enthusiasm. "This is a great opportunity for me, sir," she told her. "I'm honored Commander Xylion chose me for this assignment. How deep into the nebula do you think we'll go?"

After reminding the ensign not to call her 'sir', not only because she didn't much care for titles, but also because she always found it strange when people close her age called her that, she tried to rein in some of their expectations. Deen had been part of a number of survey missions in her career as a science officer and where Leva and Srena were apparently expecting some sort of glorious away mission, the reality oftentimes was very different and meant spending long hours going over sensor data and analyzing the results.

"I took a year of astrophysics at the Academy," Srena had said, unwilling to compromise on her excitement. "Perhaps I'll be able to help out with the survey other than piloting the runabout. And the view is going to be absolutely gorgeous."

After spending about an hour to load supplies onto the runabout *Nebuchadrezzar* and helping the deck crew installing the sensor and lab modules required for this specialized mission, they cleared *Eagle's* shuttle bay on a pre-planned flight plan which allowed them to cover the greatest amount of real estate in the time they had been given.

"Transphasic shield module is active and functioning to expected parameters," said Leva from his console. "Shields at one-hundred percent efficiency."

Deen who occupied the co-pilot's chair turned towards the Vulcan behind her. "Explain to me again how you managed to convince Rosenthal to borrow this module?"

"It was a simple matter of making the professor understand the breakthrough scientific discoveries his shield technology would be able to make possible."

Deen smirked. "In other words you bribed the man with credit on our survey."

"That term is incorrect and inappropriate," he said. "However Professor Rosenthal seemed indeed very interested in having his name associated with this expedition."

"The man is a glory hound, if you ask me," said Leva.

"Regardless of his personal values, his transphasic shield design is both highly effective and ingenious," the Vulcan said.

"Uh, sir, I'm reading an unusual gravimetric disturbance at two-three-four mark nine-five, approximately eight-hundred million kilometers from our position."

Deen quickly brought up her findings on her own console. While their shield modifications did a great job to protect them from the nebula's radiation, their sensors and communications systems were still greatly affected, especially over range. It was almost impossible to know for certain what the sensors had detected. "I see it," she said. "Looks unusual for this kind of nebula. Worth a peek, I'd say."

But Xylion didn't appear as convinced. "The coordinates are well outside our planned flight plan."

"You're telling me you're not even a little bit curious as to what this could be?" she said with a smile.

She could tell from the expression on his face that he was at least considering it. She had known him long enough to be able to notice the subtle nuances playing out on his usually carefully neutral facial expressions. He had put together a meticulously detailed flight plan which would have allowed them to give them the most time to study Aphrodite in the given time and one which did not allow for distractions such as this unexpected discovery. But then of course, making discoveries was the reason they were out here in the first place.

"Tell me we're not passing this up just because of your obsessive needs to stick to a plan?" she said with a little more fire in her voice,

understanding that sometimes you had to needle a Vulcan to get them to see your point.

"I vote for going to see what this is," said Srena.

Xylion regarded her with a stern look. "This is not a democracy, Ensign. I am in command of this away team and therefore the decision lies with me alone."

The young Andorian nodded quickly, obviously chastised for her out of turn comment.

Deen frowned. "Come on, Xyl, we're science officers. Out here to explore," she said. "This warrants exploring."

She had only recently taken on calling the Vulcan by this shortened nickname even if it was clear that he didn't appreciate this at all. It all went back to her needling theory.

"Ensign, change our heading to two-three-four mark nine-five," he said even as he entered new parameters into his station. "We will allocate twelve hours and twenty-six minutes to investigate this disturbance. I will make the required alterations to our flight plan to allow us to complete our survey in the allocate time."

"Aye, sir," Srena said and exchanged a beaming smile with the Tenarian woman next to her. "Changing course now." She made eye contact with Deen again. "Looks like this mission is on its way to become much more exciting than you anticipated."

"I really hope not," she said, mindful that *more exciting* didn't necessarily mean the same thing to her as it did to the young Andorian.

Day Three: The Big Sleep

- I -

Michael Owens desperately tried to shake off those pesky cobwebs as he exited the turbolift on deck twenty-four. After seemingly having lost an entire night already, he hadn't been particularly happy when Lieutenant Nora Laas had woken him at oh-dark-thirty, calling him down to engineering for an apparent emergency.

At least he had slept this time, however short the cycle had lasted. It was still a complete mystery to him what had happened the previous night. Could it have been a remnant of the Hyterian infection as Deen had suggested? That had happened over two years ago and he had experienced no further ill effects after that episode had concluded so it seemed unlikely that his lost night was related to that long-dead civilization.

For now he would just have to write it off as one of those strange anomalies one encountered on a regular basis while living and working in outer space and hope he'd find the time on making up those lost hours soon.

He found a crowd had gathered outside engineering and he noticed the number of civilian engineers who were part of Professor Rosenthal's team were being kept out of main engineering along with many regular crewmembers. Two armed security specialists were guarding the main door.

Charlie Colcord, the professor's senior advisor, immediately zeroed in on him when she spotted him coming down the corridor.

"Captain, what is the meaning of this?" she said even before he had reached the group. She looked visibly upset and even more astonishingly, not the least bit weary or fatigued considering the late hour. Instead she was the epitome of an energized professional, looking crisp and ready to work. "As you are aware, sir, we are on a very tight schedule to complete the array and do not have the luxury to afford

these kind of delays. It is completely unacceptable that we are being kept out of engineering in this manner.”

Owens joined her and took in the scene. Rosenthal was in the process of polishing his eyeglasses, once again quite happy to have his young and energetic colleague do most of the talking.

“Miss Colcord, I’m sure there is a perfectly good reason why main engineering has been sealed off—”

“A better reason than completing a spy array which will yield invaluable data on enemy fleet movements which could play a role in winning this war?” she said.

He sighed. “Honestly, I don’t know,” he said truthfully. “Why don’t you let me find out?”

She nodded. “Yes, please do. We are here to work, Captain, not stand idly by and wait to be given access to vital areas of the ship.”

He couldn’t be entirely certain but the look on Rosenthal’s face appeared slightly pained and he wasn’t sure if it was because of Colcord’s insisting attitude or for some other reason. Did he know more than he let on about what was taking place beyond those sealed doors?

“If you excuse me,” he told the young woman. “Professor.”

The civilian engineer gave him a nod, his expression having turned to one of concern now.

The security guards stepped aside for him and he quickly slipped into engineering.

At first glance nothing here looked quite out of the ordinary until he realized that the many gold-shirted officers busily going back and forth were not engineers but security personnel. And they were not monitoring or studying the many computer consoles and equipment in this room, they were studying the actual room.

He found Nora Laas along with Commander Star standing close to the warp core at the back of engineering and without further delay headed their way. He thought it to be odd that Star was already here. He was sure Nora would have called him first, not because it was protocol but because it seemed unlikely the Bajoran would have wanted to clue in the first officer on any urgent news before him.

He was well aware of the difficulties the two women had had working together ever since Tazla Star had come aboard to become first an acting XO and then take on the role permanently. There was something about their personalities—both headstrong, proud and

uncompromising – that simply didn't allow them to click. And there was something else, something more personal which caused friction between his chief of security and his executive officer.

Nora Laas had been in a short-lived romantic relationship with Star's highly respected predecessor which was cut short after he was tragically killed in the line of duty. Killed while saving her life no less. It had not gone over well with her that a known traitor and criminal had come in to replace the man she had been in love with.

And while Owens had his own problems with the Trill first officer, Nora's issues it seemed were of a more personal nature which he needed them to work out together.

"Captain," the Bajoran said, beating Star to it. "Over here, sir."

"What's going on?"

"We have a situation."

"You called me down here at 0100 hours. You better be having a situation, Lieutenant," he said as he stepped up next to the warp core, gently humming and pulsing with bright azure light. Looking around he couldn't immediately see what the nature of this situation could be.

"Take a look for yourself," said Star, and Owens found her appearing particularly grim which he didn't attribute to the early hour, as she looked down the pit surrounding the warp core. He noticed that she made an effort not to touch the bright red safety railing.

Nora mirrored the move and the captain followed suit.

The situation was a dead crewman, lying sprawled out at the bottom of the pit, at least twenty meters below and in a large pool of his own blood. The man wore a golden uniform undershirt, making him a technical specialist or security officer. He had dark skin and long, silvery hair and was clearly humanoid but possibly not human.

Michael immediately felt a sickness growing in the pit of his stomach. Not because of seeing a dead person, he had seen plenty of those before, many more than he'd ever wanted and even more so since the outbreak of the Dominion War. He was getting this feeling because this death, no matter what it turned out to be, seemed to him like the most senseless of all. This was not a wartime casualty, lost while defending freedom and the Federation, this, it appeared was an entirely preventable and tragic death.

"What the hell happened?" he said, unable to keep the anger in check. "Who is that?"

“Lieutenant Jinlu Gedar, sir,” said Nora Laas.

He gave her an empty look. He remembered the promising young engineer from his inspired performance in the play two days earlier. The man, it had turned out, had been a most gifted actor and had drawn much praise from the audience that night, including from himself.

The fact that he had known the victim, shook his hand even, it made this so much worse. It probably shouldn't have, this was tragic no matter who the dead person was, but feelings rarely lied.

“He was discovered about twenty minutes ago by the duty engineer. It's too soon to say what happened but I doubt it was an accident,” said Star.

Owens didn't miss the dark look the security chief was aiming at the first officer, obviously not happy with her already making speculations.

“You're saying this was done on purpose?” said Owens, not quite able to keep from sounding astonished by the revelation.

“I think we need to treat this as a homicide,” said the first officer.

“A homicide?” said the captain, still trying to get to grips with what she was saying. In his entire Starfleet career he had never come across a murder scene. They still happened within the Federation and even more infrequently within Starfleet but hardly ever on a starship. Perhaps on some frontier outpost or a border colony but on a Starfleet vessel something like this was almost unheard of.

“The only other option would be a suicide and from what I know about Mister Gedar, I find that difficult to believe,” said Star.

Owens turned to look at his security chief for an opinion. She nodded hesitantly as if it pained her to agree with the first officer. “I don't think we should rule anything out yet but I do think we should treat this as if it were a homicide as well. We may have a murderer on this ship and if that is true, we need to act quickly.”

The idea disgusted him. Bad enough they had lost people to the Dominion, now one of their own was killing fellow crewmembers. It was entirely unacceptable. “If you're right I want whoever did this brought to justice as soon as possible and before they have a chance to strike again.”

Nora nodded sharply but before she could respond, Star jumped in. “Sir, I think I should lead on the investigation.”

"This is a security matter, Commander," the Bajoran barked. "I'll handle this."

"If this were a simple security matter, perhaps," she said, managing to keep her cool considering Nora's brusque tone. "But this is an actual investigation. We don't know who we are looking for yet and whoever did this is likely trying to cover their tracks. We'll need a certain finesse to catch the perpetrator."

Nora defiantly crossed her arms in front of her chest. "And you're saying I don't have finesse, is that it?"

Star was unapologetic. "It's not a quality I would attribute to you, no."

"Captain, with all due respect –"

But Owens raised his hand to stop his two officers from getting into it in front of a crowd of spectators, not to mention at a murder scene. It was the last thing he needed. "Let me make this very clear to you both," he said, keeping his voice low but with enough of an edge to make it clear he was being serious. "Whatever it is that's going on between the two of you, I need it to stop. Right now. This," he said and pointed towards the warp core pit, "is absolutely unacceptable on my ship, on any ship, and I want to know who is responsible. That's all I care about. Understood?"

The two women nodded sharply.

"And I'll find out, sir," said Nora, not willing to give up on the argument even after the captain's speech. "Criminal investigations of any nature fall into my purview. Let me handle this and I promise I get you the killer."

He considered her for a moment and also noticed Star's doubt filled eyes. She seemed eager to take on the investigation herself, this much seemed clear but he couldn't be sure if this was because she genuinely felt more qualified or because she saw this as an opportunity to prove herself to him. He finally gave the security chief the nod to proceed. "It's your investigation, Lieutenant. Whatever it takes, get me whoever did this."

"Yes, sir."

Star pretended to be a good loser but she clearly had one more point to make. "Sir, I hate to bring this up but there is the matter of the sensor array construction. The longer we delay Rosenthal and his

people access to main engineering and other areas, the greater the chance that we will not meet our deadline to finish construction.”

“A man just died here, Commander, I’m not sure what that means to you but my priorities are clear,” Nora said.

“People are dying by the hundreds every day,” said Star and doing a commendable job of keeping her own voice down. “I am as disturbed by what happened here as you are but I also understand the wider implications of our mission here,” she added and then looked back at the captain. “I’m not trying to prioritize one thing over the other, sir, I’m just saying that both objectives are of vital importance.”

Owens considered that for a moment before he found himself in agreement with his first officer and nodded. “Lieutenant, do whatever you have to but wrap things up in here quickly,” he said, already aware that Nora’s security people were taking a myriad of scans of the engine room and knowing that that should allow them to recreate the crime scene in minute detail. “We cannot afford to significantly delay or hinder the professors’ efforts. The stakes are too high.”

“Understood.”

Owens took one last look at the unfortunate dead body of the former Lieutenant Gedar. It was the least he could do as regardless of how he had died, it had happened under his command and therefore part of the responsibility was his. It was going to be his job to find a way to make his family understand that their son had died in the most senseless fashion on board of his ship. It was a duty he was already dreading.

“I want whoever did this,” he seethed before he turned and headed for the secondary exit, consciously avoiding another run in with Rosenthal and Colcord.

Going back to bed and catching up on sorely needed rest, he knew was no longer an option.

- II -

She was still trying to get her head around the fact that a member of her crew had quite possibly been the victim of a heinous crime. Had been murdered. And no matter how one looked at this, the truth was it had happened on her watch. Security, after all, was her role and therefore the safety of all crewmembers was solely her responsibility. As far as she was concerned, she had failed. She had failed Lieutenant Gedar.

Nora Laas crouched near the body of the Krellonian engineer and watched quietly while members of her security team scanned every last bit of forensic evidence possible before the body would be transported to the morgue for an autopsy by Doctor Katanga.

It still bothered her that Commander Star had openly declared that she wasn't up to the task of heading this investigation. So perhaps criminal matters were not her specialty. She was a fighter first and foremost. A leader of men if she had to be. Probably the best hand-to-hand combatant on the ship and deadly accurate with almost any weapon. She had partaken in a couple of investigations before, most recently as a deputy security chief on Deep Space Two almost five years ago. Her colleague and friend So'Dan Leva had been in charge of the investigation initially as the head of security and admittedly her contributions had not been significant.

Her lack of experience didn't mean she'd yield to Tazla Star. She was head of security and no matter what, she would find the guilty party and bring them to justice. That she had promised the captain, and perhaps even more importantly, she had promised herself.

José Carlos, her deputy, approached holding a padd. The man was loyal to a fault, tall and muscular, the Hispanic officer had been made for security work. Did he have the finesse, as Star had put it, to find a killer, she wondered. She hadn't exactly recruited her team based on their investigative skills. An oversight she came to regret now.

Nora stood. "What precisely do we know so far?"

Carlos had been prepared for the question and referred to his padd. "Cause of death appears to be severe trauma from impact," he said and looked up along the warp core shaft and towards where he had likely plummeted to his death. "I'd say he fell about twenty meters and landed face down." He turned back to his padd. "Time of death

was between 2330 hours and 0045 hours. The doctor is trying to narrow it down but that might not be that easy."

"Why not?"

"Apparently we don't know much about Krellonian physiology or how their bodies react after death. His body temperature is nowhere near what it should be."

"Who found the body?"

"Crewman Asher Sanzenbacher at 0045," he said. "He called in the medical emergency. The medical team arrived two minutes later and found Gedar already dead. Doctor Katanga arrived at 0053 and officially pronounced before calling us. By 0055 we were on site and engineering had been sealed off."

"Ten minute after he was discovered," she said, mostly to herself as she considered the body still sitting in a large puddle of his slowly drying blood. "Plenty of time for the killer to slip away. If he hadn't already," she said and turned back to her deputy. "Internal sensors?"

He shook his head. "Turned off."

"What? How?" she said, fully aware if the sensors had been operating, especially the visual pickups, this investigation would have been over before it had even begun.

"They were turned off after we entered the nebula," he said, sounding frustrated himself. "Apparently the background radiation rendered them useless and provided false data."

"Splendid," she said. "Glad I was told about this."

He shrugged helplessly. Clearly he hadn't been told either.

She turned back to watch as the medical technicians began to remove the body now that the site had been thoroughly scanned and documented. "I want statements from everyone who's seen the body along with everyone else who's been talking to Gedar within the last twenty-four hours. Let's start with everyone in engineering and then widen the net in the morning."

"I've already taken Sanzenbacher's statement."

She nodded. "Good. Make sure every last square inch of the room has been scanned. I want to be able to create an exact replica on the holodeck. Then seal off this area but reopen main engineering. I want two armed guards here for the rest of the day."

Carlos seemed surprised by these orders. "We're letting people back onto the crime scene already?"

She frowned. "Not my choice," she said curtly. "After you're done tell everyone to get a good night's rest. We start first thing at 0700 to put the pieces together and find whoever the hells did this."

"Yes, sir."

Nora shot a last glance at Gedar's body before it began to dematerialize, leaving behind only the large stain of his dark red blood as gruesome evidence that a young man had met his death here tonight. Then she turned and headed back to the elevator which would deposit her to the main engineering deck above. Once there she'd make her way straight back to her quarters. Not to catch up on sleep she knew wouldn't come but to start her investigation and learn everything she could about the victim.

No matter what Star or anyone else thought, she was going to find whoever did this. After all she had promised herself and Nora Laas was not a woman to make empty promises. No matter what it would take, she would not allow a killer to roam free on her ship.

- III -

"I thought we'd have more time," said the young man on the screen.

The connection was already mostly garbled and she had found it more and more difficult to make out his face, but now the sound was beginning to fade out as well. *"Not in this soup,"* she said. *"This nebula is different to most others we've encountered. It has some fairly interesting attributes; unfortunately they affect most of our equipment, including sensors, communications and engines."*

His smirk was noticeable even through the deteriorating comm channel. *"Look at you being the big scientist all of a sudden."*

She responded with her own little smile. *"Hardly. I did write a paper on proto-nebulae in my sophomore year, took me almost the entire semester to do research on it, too."*

"Must be why Commander Xylion chose you," he said, *"I didn't know you had scientific ambitions."*

"I was considering it back at the Academy," the Andorian said. *"But then the war happened and I had to choose a focus. I figured I was more likely to make my mark as the best pilot in Starfleet instead of a second-rate research assistant."*

The connection cut out for a moment before his face popped back up. *"It's going to go any moment now."*

"Yeah."

"Listen, you watch yourself out there, okay?"

She nodded and then offered a wide smile, showing off her pearly whites against her dark blue lips. *"It's just a survey mission,"* she said. *"It's not like I'm piloting a combat shuttle against Jem'Hadar warships."*

His concern was obvious, after all he was one of the few people who knew about her combat mission a year earlier when, after her shuttle had been nearly crippled, she had been ordered to carry out a suicide run against a Jem'Hadar ship threatening to destroy *Eagle*. He knew that the mission had affected her greatly, maybe even changed her forever, for the first time understanding that Starfleet was much more than just an adventure. It had become a life and death struggle for those fighting the war against the Dominion.

"I don't want you to worry," she added quickly.

"I'll try not to. And just to make sure you come back in one piece, I may have a surprise in store for you once you return."

"Ah, the anticipation is going to kill me."

"Make sure it doesn't. I'll see—"

The comm system finally gave up compensating for the interference caused by the nebula's radiation. The shield modifications made sure that they remained relatively safe inside the runabout but it could do nothing to prevent it affecting their communications.

"Lance?"

But the connection was dead. When she tried to re-establish, the computer quickly advised her that it was unable to comply and she knew she wouldn't be able to see or talk to him again until they returned from their mission.

When she heard the approaching footsteps, she quickly ceased her attempts. She was supposed to pilot the runabout, not chat with her friends back on *Eagle*.

DeMara Deen took the seat next to her. "Anything to report?"

"No, sir ... I mean, Dee," she said, correcting herself quickly. "We're still two hours out from our destination."

She nodded and looked over the latest sensor readouts. The sensitive high-resolution scanners they had installed on the runabout before departure were running nonstop to collect as much data as possible about the nebula. They weren't as efficient as usual due to the strong radiation but they were able to learn much more than they would have if they had stayed on *Eagle*.

"How are people back on the ship?" she said without taking her eyes off her screens.

"They're fine," she said without thinking. Then her head jerked up. "I mean ... I think ... I think they're fine," she added looking at the beautiful, golden-locked lieutenant to her right, trying to appear as clueless as possible and of course failing miserably.

Dee looked up. "I'm sorry, I couldn't help overhearing part of your conversation with Lieutenant Stanmore. I know it was rude but I didn't want to interrupt."

Her mouth opened and then closed. "How much ... how much did you hear?"

"Just the last bit."

Srena's face gained some color. Bad enough that she had been caught red-handed chatting with her boyfriend, as it so happened, DeMara Deen was Lance Stanmore's boss. "I'm so sorry, sir, I swear it won't happen again."

She offered a sweet smile. "Don't worry about it. In fact I think you and Lance make a great couple."

Now she turned periwinkle. "We're not ... I mean, not really. Actually I don't know what we are."

"Well, it seemed pretty obvious to me that you two care a great deal for each other," she said. "And there is nothing wrong with that."

"We work together," Srena said. "And I'm sure if Commander Star found out, she'd give me hell over it. She's singled me out as a special project of hers and I know she'd be rather displeased if I let myself get distracted like this."

"Distracted?"

"Well, I'd imagine that would be what she'd call it."

Deen nodded. "Your secret is safe with me. But if you ask me, you shouldn't have to hide things. Fraternizing with a fellow crewmember is not a taboo, and we live in the kind of times we can't take anything for granted."

The Andorian nodded thoughtfully. It was a conclusion she'd arrived at herself, especially since having come within inches of dying in a fiery kamikaze attack.

"How do you do it?"

The Tenarian glanced at the young ensign with a little twinkle in her eye. "Do what?"

"Uh, I mean, aren't you with anyone right now?"

Deen's face turned thoughtful for just a brief moment, almost wistful. It was quickly dispelled but not quickly enough to not make Srena feel extremely uncomfortable, even embarrassed at having asked the question. She quickly turned back to her instruments. "I'm sorry that was way out of line. It's none of my business."

Dee quickly shook her head. "No, not at all," she said, sounding like her good-natured self again. "And I'm not seeing anyone. What would make you think I was?"

"Well," she said, starting out carefully now. "I suppose I just assumed because you are, you know ..."

"Tenarian?"

"I was going to say beautiful and sensual," she said and suddenly felt like sinking into her seat until she disappeared.

She uttered a little laugh. "Thank you, Srena," she said. "I shall take that as a compliment. But I have you know I haven't been in any kind of relationship since my early days at the Academy."

"Oh, okay," she said. "Now I feel stupid."

"Don't. I just haven't found the right person yet. Clearly you have and you should take full advantage," she said but even Srena could tell that there appeared to be more to what she was saying than she let on, no matter how much Deen tried to pretend otherwise.

"Right person for what?"

The two turned to see So'Dan Leva stride into the compartment. A large smirk was plastered on the half-Romulan's face, as if extremely intrigued at the conversation between the two young women.

Deen frowned at him. "Girl talk," she said. "Not for your tapered ears to hear."

"What a shame, I'm sure it would've made great material for my personal log."

The Andorian giggled, realizing perhaps for the first time that senior officers weren't really all that different. Even the usually dead-serious half-Romulan tactical officer was much less intimidating up close and the normally stoic Vulcan science officer actually had a sense of humor, even if it was so subtle, one blink and you'd miss it.

She wasn't entirely sure if these usually stone-faced men had let their guard down thanks to Deen's inherent charm or if this simply was the way these people carried themselves when they were socializing among themselves and not faced with the latest crisis.

After a couple more minutes of light banter, the small crew of the runabout fell into their various roles, mostly observing and analyzing whatever information the sensors were able to gleam from their marvelous surroundings and Srena, too, decided to apply some of her admittedly limited astrophysics background to the study of the nebula while keeping at least one eye on the navigational data lest they'd run into some unexpected trouble.

The truth was that she had always been fascinated by stellar phenomena which couldn't be neatly classified or categorized. It was why she had developed an interest in travelling the stars and becoming an explorer in the first place and what had led her to consider a science

career while at the Academy. In fact her paper had focused on nebulae with unexpected and unexplainable attributes just like Aphrodite. Lance had probably been right when he had guessed that her work at the Academy had likely garnered her the spot on the away team.

After just a few minutes of analyzing the wide-band EM spectrum sensor results she found something very odd about the composition of this particular nebula. It possessed all the elements one would expect from a proto-nebula of this size and type, including dust, hydrogen, helium and a variety of other ionized gases but there was another element here not usually observed in nebulae. Those bright little sprites of various colors which gave Aphrodite their unique look were for all intents and purposes plasma fragments and most likely a holdover from a planetary body, possibly a gas giant, which had dissolved and helped create the nebula.

In her paper, Srena had speculated that similar plasma fragments could exhibit an almost instinctive movement pattern not unlike single-cell organisms, traversing their environments not just randomly but with some sort of purpose. And this seemed to be the case here as well. Perhaps even more so than in the examples she had studied and she couldn't help wonder if there was more to this than she had theorized in her thesis where she had attributed these patterns to an electromagnetic attraction, like protons constantly racing after oppositely-charged electrons. But there were no signs of electromagnetic radiation in Aphrodite significant enough to explain those movements. There had to be another explanation for how and why these little sprites roamed across the nebula.

Srena's considerations were cut short when the runabout trembled suddenly and caused a loud warning siren to echo across the cockpit.

"What's going on?" said Leva from his station, clearly startled by the unexpected turbulence.

The Andorian pilot cursed herself for having been so distracted with her findings, actually having taken her eyes of navigation completely for a while. She quickly turned back to the helm controls and sensors. "We're running into gravimetric sheer," she said. "I ... I don't understand where this came from."

Deen shot her an encouraging look. "It didn't show up on sensors."

She replied with a thankful nod at the revelation that while the operations officer had been keeping her eyes on the navigational instruments, it hadn't made much of a difference.

The small vessel began to heave and shake, forcing the occupants to hold on tightly to their stations.

Srena couldn't help but be reminded of the unnatural storm in the play she'd watched a couple of days ago and a ship, albeit a much different one, getting into a tough scrape with nature they'd ultimately lose. She tried to ban those thoughts out of her head. "The sheer is intensifying; navigational deflector is losing power and forward momentum has increased by thirty percent."

"I'd say we've found the source of this mysterious gravimetric disturbance," said Deen even while her fingers raced over her console, trying to compensate for the increasingly rough ride.

"Excellent," said Leva sarcastically. "Now that we've felt it, can we move on?"

"Helm is responding very sluggishly," Srena said. "Whatever this is, it's as if it's pulling us in."

Deen's efforts to stabilize the ship also bore little fruit. "There's more to this than just some spatial disturbance."

"I'd say."

Srena turned to see that Commander Leva had stepped up right in-between her and Deen, grabbing the back of their chairs to maintain his balance while his eyes were focused on the forward viewports.

She followed his gaze, curious at what had made him get out of his chair under these conditions. The thick, colorful gasses making up the nebula pulled back like a veil to reveal something she had not expected to find here. A planet.

"Sensors are confirming a rogue planetoid dead ahead," said Xylion, his voice sounding surprised at this discovery. "It appears to be surrounded by significant electromagnetic disturbance."

"Lightning," said Srena who couldn't find a better analogy as she saw the massive, bright discharges which rippled across the space around the planet.

"And we're heading straight for it," said Leva.

"Ensign, change your heading to four-six mark one-eight seven."

She quickly entered the course correction but to her frustration found that the runabout hardly responded to her prompts at all. The nose turned far too slowly.

"It's not working, the gravimetric sheer is pulling us in," said the operations officer.

"Ensign, full reverse, all thrusters."

Srena shook her head when that too made little difference. "It's not significantly arresting our momentum."

"Switching to full impulse," said Deen.

The runabout lurched hard and a new alarm klaxons alerted the crew to a possibly catastrophic structural failure.

"It's ripping the ship apart!" Srena shouted.

"Lieutenant, terminate the impulse engines," said the Vulcan just as they were struck by the lightning-like discharges surrounding the ever-increasing orb they were approaching.

Srena lifted her fingers off her controls as powerful electric currents began to course through them, flicking them on and off.

"No need," said Deen. "We have massive system failures all across the board."

Srena was close to panic. "We're losing helm control."

"This is going to get a lot worse," said Leva and the Andorian knew exactly what he was talking about when she looked back up and out of the viewport. They were now tumbling uncontrollably towards the surface of the planet.

Xylion put into words what everyone was already thinking. "Brace for crash landing."

- IV -

Sleep hadn't come easy to her. The notion that somebody had been killed on her watch had been difficult enough to digest, the fact that it had fallen to her – at her own insistence – to catch the killer, was a challenge she had rarely faced in her career as a security officer.

Protecting assets or personnel on an away mission, boarding hostile vessels or repel enemy forces, disarm booby traps, she even had basic certification to take over the tactical station on the bridge if the need arose, but criminal investigations were really not something Starfleet security officers normally trained for and her experience as a teenage freedom fighter on Bajor and later a Marine hadn't exactly prepared her for this either.

Of course she hadn't admitted any of this to Owens when she had demanded that it had to be her to lead the investigation. No matter how one looked at it, as the security chief it had to be her job to prevent or if necessary investigate crimes committed on her ship. Even if it was the most heinous crime imaginable.

So she had spent most of her night reading up on Starfleet criminal investigations. Sure, there was the obligatory textbook on the matter but other than that, actual records were in scarce supply. Crimes of this nature usually didn't take place on Starfleet vessels or installations and when they did, one could usually rely on the Starfleet JAG corps for assistance and guidance.

Considering *Eagle's* current mission parameters, that, of course, was not an option. She had to do this by herself and she was determined to be successful.

She was still reading one of the few case studies which were somewhat comparable with her own when she entered her security office at 0700 sharp.

Lieutenant José Carlos was already waiting for her with a cup of hot *raktajino* which she took off him without so much as looking him in the eye.

"Good Morning, sir."

"Not sure what's good about it," she said and made the mistake of trying to sip the steaming hot coffee, which she quickly came to regret.

“We’ve got a killer on the loose on the ship. In fact, no more good mornings until we’ve brought whoever did this to justice.”

The Hispanic officer nodded sharply.

“Has the crime scene been recorded?”

“Every last square centimeter, just as you asked. The computer has already finished compiling the data and holodeck two has been reserved to reproduce main engineering exactly the way we found it last night. You should also know that—”

“Access has been restricted? We can’t have the killer just stroll in there and fool around with my crime scene. Even if it is just a reconstruction.”

“Doors have been locked only to accept access to yourself,” he said. “As an additional precaution I’ve stationed two armed guards around the clock.”

“Good,” she said and tried the *rakatjino* again. She really needed a shot of it to get herself ready for what undoubtedly was going to be a long, hard day. But she froze just before the cup reached her lips as she watched a couple of her people entering the room. They were joking and laughing amongst themselves and leisurely heading over to the replicator.

“There is somebody—” but Carlos didn’t get a chance to finish as Nora abruptly turned away from him to face her seemingly relaxed officers, engaging in water-cooler banter around the replicator.

Unbeknownst to him, her gaze drilled itself into a junior officer who had laughed out loudly following something his fellow colleague had said. “Ensign, I didn’t quite catch that joke,” she with sufficient volume in her tone to make every last person turn her way.

The young man she had addressed looked at her with wide-open eyes. “I ... I’m sorry, ma’am?”

She took a step towards the human. “You seem to be having a terribly good time so I was just wondering what the joke is?”

The ensign seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Well?”

He shook his head. “Uh ... there was no, joke, ma’am. I apologize if—”

But Nora Laas had lost interest when she spotted another couple of her people enter the room. Quickly checking the chronometer, she found it was already 0706 hours.

Petty Officer Skyler McIntyre and Caitian Ensign T'Nerr immediately sensed the tense atmosphere in the room, not to mention the hawk-like gaze from their boss and instantly stopped talking amongst themselves.

Nora for her part took a deep breath, allowed a few more stragglers to come in and then turned to the dozen or so personnel who made up alpha shift. "Some of you may have heard we've had a murder last night," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Some of you may even have realized that this does not happen on *Eagle* and that I specifically asked for everyone to be here at 0700 sharp this morning. Let me make something very clear to you now. And please, by all means, make sure you communicate this to the rest of the team. From this point forward until whoever was responsible for killing Lieutenant Gedar has been apprehended, we will be entirely focuses on the task at hand. And you will get here, exactly when I ask you to get here and when you do you'll be focused on one thing only. I will not accept tardiness and complacency from anyone. If you find you cannot behave like a professional, than quite frankly you have no place in my team or in security for that matter. Go see if they have an opening for you in engineering. Do I make myself clear?"

There were nods all around, each and every one of her people standing up straighter and their gazes fixes at the security chief.

"Do I make myself clear?" she repeated in a louder voice.

"Yes, ma'am," they shouted back in unison.

"Good, now get to work. There's much to be done," she added and then turned back to Carlos. "I will rely on you to make sure to keep them focused and in line. I know people were thinking that because we're no longer on the frontlines we could relax but that's not the case. There's a new war going on and this one will be fought right here on board this ship."

She had suddenly lost her taste in *rakatjino* and passed it back to her deputy.

"Uh, Lieutenant."

"And before I forget, I want you to pull Gedar's service record along with all the information we have on anyone in engineering around the time of his death. Start with Professor Rosenthal's civilian team," she said and turned to head to her office. She managed three steps before she stopped suddenly. "José?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Who is that sitting in my office?"

"Ah, yes, I've been trying to tell you. That's Lieutenant Clancy. He said he's here to see you."

She turned back around to shoot him a displeased look. "Why didn't you say so earlier?"

"Uh, I tried but you—"

"Never mind," she said. "Just get me those files, will you?"

"Yes, sir," he said before he quickly retreated, clearly thankful for the opportunity to be out of her line of fire for now.

Nora Laas stepped into her office and the man sitting in the chair facing her desk quickly stood. He was tall, with an athletic look, wavy brown hair and a friendly, inviting face. His rank insignia identified him as a junior lieutenant and he wore science colors underneath his uniform jacket. Nora was sure she'd seen him around but couldn't immediately place him.

He offered an easy smile and held out his hand. "Ah, Lieutenant Nora. I don't think we've ever formally met. I'm Alex Clancy."

She shook his hand shortly before she stepped around him to get to her own chair.

"That was a nice speech you gave, by the way. Way to motivate the troops during a crisis."

She looked him over suspiciously. "How may I help you, Lieutenant? As you can imagine, we're all quite busy at the moment," she said as she took her chair.

"Of course. That's why I'm here," he said and followed suit. That easy smile not leaving his lips. "I'm here to offer my services to your investigation."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I'm an assistant counselor and I have a little bit of experience dealing with homicide investigations. There aren't too many people within Starfleet who can say that so I thought it made sense that I'd offer you my services any way you see fit."

"You're a counselor?"

"Assistant counselor."

"I see." She seemed to consider that for a moment and then abruptly stood again. Clancy quickly left his chair as well. "Well, I'm

certainly thankful that you came by and I'll make sure to call you if I think I'll need your help."

It didn't take a counselor, assistant or otherwise, to tell that Nora had just dismissed Clancy and yet the man stayed rooted to the spot. That smile was gone now and he seemed somewhat uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"As I said," Nora repeated, adding a little fire to her tone. "I'll call if I need you."

"About that, you see, I wasn't entirely honest with you just now and I feel quite silly about that, to tell you the truth."

She raised an eyebrow, clearly not comprehending.

"That certainly was no way to start our relationship."

"What relationship?" she said, clearly beginning to get frustrated with this conversation. "We don't have a relationship."

He nodded slowly. "Honestly, I thought she would have told you already."

"Told me what? What the hells are you talking about?"

"See the fact of the matter is, while I do believe I could be helpful to you, this wasn't actually my idea. I was approached by—"

"Commander Star," Nora interrupted, seething now.

He nodded. "In fact I'm under orders to assist—"

But the security chief was already half way to the door by then. "Don't get comfortable, I'll be right back," she said a moment before she stormed out of her own office.

Clancy looked after her. "Guess she didn't tell you then."

“The benefits are quite obvious. Higher crew rotations means that we have more focused and rested personnel on duty on any given day. By adding the additional shift we also increase and reinforce overall crew experience and skill in key positions. Of course there’ll have to be additional training and we’d probably want to rotate shifts around a little bit. Move delta shift up to beta and vice versa, that kind of thing.”

But Michael Owens was barely listening to his first officer explaining her recent proposal in more detail. It wasn’t because he didn’t think it had merit or because he was still feeling tired from a night seemingly lost and another interrupted. But it was hard to focus on routine ship operations when in reality recent events had made it clear that anything but routine applied.

A crime taking place on a starship was rare enough, a murder was almost unheard of. And it had happened on his ship. During a war which was claiming people by the thousands, somebody had felt it necessary to thin their ranks even further by this despicable act. It was incomprehensible to him.

The sound of the door’s enunciator finally managed what Star had not been able to do, refocus his thoughts. “Enter.”

But before the words had even come over his lips, the doors had already parted and a clearly fuming Nora Laas was practically barging into his office. “Captain, I apologize for this interruption,” she said and regardless of her words, sounded rather unapologetic, “but would you kindly remind Commander Star of your earlier decision of assigning me the Gedar case as I don’t believe she fully understood.”

The first officer jumped to her feet, blushing slightly at the rude manner in which the security chief had entered the room and almost barked at the captain. “Lieutenant, you’re way out of line.”

“I’m out of line?” she said, aiming a perplexed look at the Trill. “I’m not the one disregarding clear orders from a superior officer.”

For a moment the redheaded XO didn’t even seem to know how to respond to this accusation.

“Sir,” said Nora and considered Owens again, “you had made yourself perfectly clear to the both of us as to who was to take the lead

on this investigation. How am I expected to do this if I'm being undermined – “

“What in the seven hells are you talking about?” Star barked at the lieutenant, clearly losing her composure for a split-second before reining herself in again.

“Don't play coy, Commander. You had this ... this counselor take over the investigation on your behalf and – “

“I did no such thing, Lieutenant.”

“That's funny because according to him you've given him explicit orders to – “

“Enough.”

The two women stopped and looked at the captain almost as if only just realizing that he was also still in the room.

“Sit down. Both of you,” he said sharply, as if unable to believe that he was playing arbiter in a seemingly childish fight between his own senior officers.

The two women took the seats in front of his desk, both looking at least slightly chastised for allowing to let it come to a near shouting match in the captain's ready room no less. Both absolutely avoided eye contact with each other.

“This is not acceptable,” Owens said, his voice sounding much softer now. “A heinous crime has been committed on my ship and I cannot have the two of you fighting each other instead of focusing on getting me whoever is responsible for this.”

“Sir, if I may,” Nora began tentatively and then continued when he responded with a little nod. “I believe you were perfectly clear as how you wished to handle this matter. As your chief of security, you asked me to solve this crime and handle all aspects of this investigation. My team and I were all set up to do just that until I was undermined by Commander Star who clearly has her own designs in regards to this investigation.”

The first officer's face turned a darker shade of red and she did everything but bite her lip to bark out a fierce rebuttal to Nora's provocative words.

“This counselor is neither requested nor required and clearly has only been assigned to me so that Commander Star may have a spy within the investigative team and influence it to her own purposes,” she continued, keeping her steely focus on Owens the entire time.

The captain uttered a little sigh before looking at his first officer. Her brimming eyes considered him for moment and Michael thought he could see a hint of pain in them. Perhaps it was even anger for having been placed in a situation in which she had to justify her actions in front of a subordinate. "Commander, who is this counselor?"

She took a small breath of air, presumably in order to not allow her angered state to dictate her next words. "First of all, sir, may I just point out that I resent Lieutenant Nora's implications that I have any designs on *her* investigation other than finding the person responsible for this crime."

Owens nodded. The atmosphere in his ready room had taken on a distinct courtroom feel and he wasn't all too pleased about this.

"I have asked Assistant Counselor Alex Clancy to aid Lieutenant Nora in her investigation –"

Nora grunted noticeably, shooting the captain a 'get-a-load-of-this' look.

"To aid the Lieutenant with her investigation," Star continued, her voice taking on a little volume to stress her point, "in the best interest of finding the person or persons responsible for this crime as quickly as possible."

"And how would a counselor be able to assist me with that, Commander?" Nora asked, unable to keep her voice free of sarcasm.

The Trill turned to glance at the woman sitting next to her and if looks could kill, Nora would have died on the spot. "Well, for starters, Lieutenant, presumably we are dealing with a living person here. Somebody with a mind, possibly a disturbed mind, who felt it necessary to kill another living person for reasons which must have been entirely unacceptable. Who better to try and understand such a person than somebody whose job it is to study minds?"

"Fine then," she said. "Once I find whoever did this, you can have this counselor of yours psychoanalyze the perpetrator until the fleet comes home."

"Secondly, Lieutenant Clancy was stationed for three years on Farius Prime. I don't have to tell you that that planet is practically run by the Orion Syndicate and that crimes are rampant there. As a Starfleet liaison to the local government, Clancy took part or assisted in a number of criminal investigations ranging from misdemeanors to

felonies. How many criminal investigations have you taken part of, Lieutenant?"

"I'll have you know that I successfully investigated a homicide when I served on Deep Space Two," she responded lamely.

Star considered the woman for a moment with a little twinkle in her eye, almost as if she had been waiting for that point to come up. "Investigate?" she said. "A bit generous of a term, don't you think? You were assisting Commander Leva at the time who did most of the heavy lifting. Besides, that was nearly six years ago. Do you have any other relevant experience you'd like us to acknowledge? Other than your mandatory Academy classes that is."

Before the Bajoran could form a retort, Star turned back to the captain. "Sir, I'm not denying that Lieutenant Nora, as the head of security, should take the lead in this investigation. But I do think that Clancy is uniquely qualified to assist and compliment her efforts to bring the responsible party to justice as quickly as possible."

"Captain," Nora began but was stopped when Owens held up his hand.

He rubbed his temples for a moment. "Lieutenant, the Commander here makes a very convincing argument. Work with Clancy. You're the lead of course but I see no harm in having the closest thing to a subject matter expert in on this."

"But, sir," she started again, clearly trying to object. Once again she was stopped by her captain.

"That would be all, Lieutenant. Go to work and find me whoever did this."

Nora looked like she wasn't done arguing her point. But after seeing the resolute expression on Owens' face, she decided against it. She shot a last, withering look at Star and then stood. "Sir," she said once more, clearly addressing only the captain and then quickly departed.

Owens uttered a heavy sigh just after the doors had closed behind his departing security chief.

For a moment silence reigned in his ready room which dragged on just short of becoming uncomfortable.

"This isn't working," he finally said.

"I've studied Clancy's file very closely. He has the right set of experiences for this task. And I trust his abilities to find a way to get on with Nora."

"I'm not talking about Clancy."

She nodded as if knowing exactly what he meant.

"Captain," she began and then left her seat and took a few steps towards the bulkhead, considering her next words carefully. She turned back around. "I'm trying here, sir, I really am. There is nobody on this ship who wants to make this work more than I do. There is nobody who has a bigger stake in my assignment here. No matter my past, I am a Starfleet officer and this is exactly where I want to be. And without this, without *Eagle*, I have nothing. I have no illusions about that. Nobody else would touch me considering my past. So I ask you, sir. What is it you want me to do? I'll be whatever kind of officer you need me to be."

He looked up at her expectant eyes. "You'd think you could do that?"

"I'll do whatever it takes, sir."

"I don't doubt that. What I don't believe however is that you are the kind of person who can completely and entirely dismiss her own nature and become somebody else just to accommodate others. 'This above all: to thine ownself be true.'"

She turned away to face the bulkhead again. "If you're right then I'm not the first officer you need."

Michael considered her for a moment, thinking back to both Maya's and Deen's assessments of his controversial first officer. In a way they had both been right about her. But what he couldn't deny was the fact that he had been anything but fair to an officer who had done nothing but try her hardest to make the best out of her second chance. "We've both undertaken on this journey together, Commander and we both knew that there would be bumps along the way. We'll both learn from them and move on."

"I don't know if I can," she said, still with her back to the captain. "You said it yourself, I can't fight my nature. It took everything I had just now to keep from boiling over."

"I understand that. And you're not wrong. Laas was out of line."

Star turned to face the captain, a perplexed look on her face. "Then why did you allow —"

Owens grimaced. "Because I've known her for a long time. Served with her for years. Because, and I'm not proud to say this, I understand her pain and anger and while it has no place in this room nor on duty for that matter, I can't just dismiss it either because the truth is, it's a pain I share with her," he stood and walked over to the window to consider the majestic beauty of the Aphrodite nebula for a moment. "Nora Laas is broken and I don't know what it will take to fix her again but I know that I'm not going to be the one to be able to do it. And I can't give up on her either," he said and then faced his first officer. "So you see, Commander, I need you on this ship. I need you to do the things I cannot do."

- VI -

When Nora returned to her office she found much to her chagrin that Alex Clancy was still there. He stood the moment she stepped into the room but before he could say a single word she shot him an icy look which she had perfected over the years and was usually reserved for subordinates who had displeased her.

It had the intended effect on Clancy.

"You are here to assist me with my investigation and clearly there is nothing I can do about that. But before we start let's set some ground rules. First, I'm in charge. You are merely here in an advisory capacity. You do what I tell you and nothing else. Is that clear?"

He nodded. "As crystal. You're the principal on the investigation. The boss, the big cheese, the top dog, the bigwig, the head honcho, the Big Kahuna. I'm just a lowly foot soldier following your every order," he said with a large grin plastered on his face.

She considered him suspiciously. "I don't even know what half those words meant but I believe I got my point across."

"You sure did."

She walked back to her chair and sat down behind her desk, keeping her eyes peeled on the counselor as if he might jump across the table and attack her at any second.

He took his seat again. "Contrary to what you may believe, Lieutenant, I am not here to spy on your progress or further anyone else's agenda. I just want to help you find whoever did this in any way I can. That is my one and only concern here."

Nora hadn't even realized how tense she had been until she felt her muscles slowly relaxing. It suddenly struck her that he was in fact quite good at what he did. Even though she had been determined not to let her guard down, he had managed to calm her with just a few well-placed words. "Alright then, Counselor, where do you suggest we start?"

"You can call me Alex if you prefer," he said with a grin.

When her look remained frosty he seemed to realize that she clearly did not prefer that at all.

"Uh, okay. Well the good news about a crime on a starship is that our culprit cannot be far and has no means to escape. That's making this

job a lot easier for us. What we have to establish now is means, motive and opportunity. Starting with opportunity, that pretty much covers nearly the entire crew."

She shook her head. "We can rule out the regular crew," she said. "The killer is more than likely amongst the civilians who recently came aboard."

"At this point we shouldn't rule out anybody unless we can establish an alibi."

"You're suggesting somebody of the crew did this?"

"I'm suggesting that anyone could be the killer. You, me, the captain, at this point we don't do ourselves any favors by excluding anyone from consideration."

"That's insane."

"Maybe. But by using the process of elimination, whoever remains is likely our culprit."

"There are somewhere near six-hundred people on this ship."

He nodded. "So we better get started. Where were you last night?"

She gave him that look again, making it clear that she was not amused by the question. But when he didn't back down, she actually began to consider it. "I was up late finishing up a report. Check the log if you want."

He offered her that easy smile again. "That's one down, 599 to go."

* * *

"When I said that I was hoping to sign on a starship once more for some excitement and adventure, this is not exactly what I had in mind," said Doctor Elijah Katanga as he hovered over the dead body of Lieutenant Jin Gedar. "Don't we have enough death and killing with the Dominion on our hands? Do we have to start killing each other?"

"So you can definitely confirm then that this man was the victim of a homicide?" asked Alex Clancy who along with Nora Laas and the doctor were the only other persons in the morgue.

“Well, it’s been a few years since I’ve performed a post-mortem —
“

“Wait,” said Clancy. “You’re saying you actually cut the body open?”

“Of course not, don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “We stopped doing open body autopsies a century ago. Why cut a person open when scanners can tell you all you need to know without ever touching the body.”

“Right,” he said, sounding somewhat relieved.

“Well, regardless how long it’s been,” Katanga said, “I know defensive bruising when I see it.”

Nora stepped closer to the naked corpse. She couldn’t deny that the dark-skinned Krellonian had been a handsome man. His toned physique was still evident, as were his kind face and his long silver and black hair which tended to cover his earless skull. He was ghostly pale now of course and cold as stone. She couldn’t immediately see any form of bruising on his skin until Katanga activated an ultraviolet light which revealed a whole pattern of sub-dermal damage underneath the skin.

Nora had seen many dead bodies in her various lives, as a resistance fighter, as a Marine, as a Starfleet security officer, different to murder, death was nothing new to her.

She noticed with some satisfaction that Clancy apparently couldn’t quite say the same. He seemed to keep himself as far away as possible to the slab containing the corpse. “Lieutenant, do you see all these bruises?” she said.

“Uh, yeah.”

She turned around and noticed that he was making every effort not to look at Gedar’s body. “Really? Because you’re standing all the way over there and I don’t really think you can get a good look from that far away.”

“I’m seeing just fine, thank you very much.”

She smirked. “I thought you had experience with this kind of thing?”

Clancy looked her straight in the eye. “Doesn’t mean I’m comfortable with dead bodies.”

“He won’t bite, son,” said Katanga.

Clancy took a deep breath but whatever courage this was supposed to have given him wasn’t quite enough to step closer. If

anything he only gagged slightly at the smell of death which apparently even the advanced sterilization field in the morgue couldn't quite neutralize.

"So let me get this straight," said the security chief, crossing her arms below her chest. "Star thinks you are some sort of expert in homicide investigations and yet you can't stand looking at a dead body?"

He frowned at that. "I never said I was an expert. I said I had some experience. As a counselor. You know what you do as a counselor, Lieutenant? You speak to people. And they tend to be alive when you talk to them."

Nora and Katanga exchanged a bemused look. "I don't think the man has the stomach for this kind of work," said the security chief.

"He should consider himself lucky we didn't cut him open then," the doctor said. "Would have made an incision right here along his sternum," he added and then drew an imaginary line across the dead man's chest. "With all those organs crammed in there so tightly, it's a real mess, I tell you."

"If you ... eh ... excuse me a moment," Clancy said. "I'll be right outside." And then he practically ran out of the morgue.

Nora Laas threw the man a cheeky grin. "You're a wicked man, Doctor, I like it."

"What's the point of being a physician if you cannot scare off the squeamish from time to time?"

Nora laughed.

"Back to the less amusing dead body in front of us," he said, his face as stern and serious as ever.

"Of course," she said, her humor suddenly gone as she focused on the many bruises on Gedar's body. "This must've been one hell of a fight."

But Katanga shook his head. "Most of the bruises are not recent."

She looked up at him with a surprised look. "He got those before last night? How?"

The doctor produced a padd. "According to his medical file, he was bruised after an accident in engineering two weeks ago."

"These don't look like they're from an accident."

Katanga nodded. "I'd have to agree. But that's what was recorded in the official log."

“Recorded by whom?”

Katanga appeared uncomfortable revealing that information.

“By whom, Doctor?” she said again, this time more insistent.

“Doctor Wenera,” he said hesitantly.

Nora looked back down at the body. The bruises, now mostly dark patches around his shoulder, chest and arms looked as if they had been quite painful. “Wenera,” she mouthed silently.

“Now, listen here, young lady, I’ve known Jane for a long time and if you are implying that she’s done anything improper – “

But Nora held up a hand. “I’m not implying anything. And she’s certainly not a suspect. She left the ship long before the time of death, correct?”

Katanga nodded. “That is right. TOD is around 2345, give or take 15 minutes. Unfortunately I cannot be more accurate. We don’t exactly have a wealth of information on Krellonian physiology in our databanks.”

“But you said that some of the bruising is recent?”

“Yes,” the doctor confirmed and lifted one of his lifeless arms. “Around the hands and wrists. It doesn’t tell us much except that there must have been a struggle before he fell.”

“Which means we’re definitely dealing with murder,” she said and studied the bruising up close.

Katanga nodded.

Nora stood back up. “Thank you, Doctor. Please let me know if you find anything else which might be relevant to the investigation,” she said. “I better go and find Clancy. I suppose I have to fill him in.”

“You’ll have a full report within a couple of hours.”

She gave him a final nod and headed for the doors.

“And Lieutenant.”

Nora stopped and turned to face him again shy of reaching the doors.

“I’ve seen and done a lot of things during my long career in Starfleet. Both beautiful and horrible things alike. But I don’t think there is anything worse than the willful murder of another person in cold blood. Do me a favor and find whatever bastard did this.”

“You’ve got my word.”

- VII -

"And you are absolutely certain about this?" asked Tazla Star while she paced Doctor Katanga's office.

"Absolutely."

"No chance this could have been an accident or perhaps even a suicide?" she continued as she kept moving, clearly deep in thought while assimilating the information Katanga had given her on his findings after completing his post-mortem on Lieutenant Gedar.

"Well, there is of course always a chance but I'm fairly convinced that his injuries were sustained during a brief struggle, implying that he did not go down that pit voluntarily or accidentally."

"Interesting. And you're sure about time of death?"

"I put all this in my report to Lieutenant Nora, Taz, why are you quizzing me on this?"

She shot him a quick look. "Nora and I have a thing."

"A thing? What does that mean? She's your subordinate, isn't she? You're the first officer for Christ's sake."

"Look, it's complicated, alright?"

He massaged his forehead in frustration. "I'm beginning to sense a lot of thing are rather complicated on this ship."

She stopped and stepped up to his desk. "Don't tell me you're already regretting leaving your comfy old post on Earth for the rough and tumble world of a starship."

"To be honest, I could've done without a murder on my first day," he responded in a deadpan.

She nodded to that but her mind seemed to be going off again at warp speed as her gaze drifted towards empty space.

"I know I'm going to regret asking this," he said, "but what's on your mind?"

She didn't respond right away but her eyes slowly found his again. "You remember my theory?"

"Ah yes, the spy," he said. "Wait a minute, you think your mystery person is responsible for this?"

"Makes a certain amount of sense, don't you think? Maybe Gedar found out about the spy's identity or got too close to learning the truth."

Katanga didn't look convinced. "And he goes ahead and kills him in such a manner which kicks off a ship-wide hunt for a murderer?" he said. "Not a very good spy if you ask me."

Star shrugged. "Maybe it wasn't planned like that. Maybe something went wrong. Maybe he or she didn't expect a fight."

"A lot of maybes. But let's assume you're right. Don't you think you should share your suspicions with our security chief who is investigating Gedar's death?"

She gave him a look as if he had lost his mind.

"Right, I forgot, you two have a thing," he said and uttered a heavy sigh.

Before the Trill could say anything further on this, the room shook suddenly and enough to cause pieces of equipment to fall onto the floor.

Katanga managed to snatch a tricorder before it dropped off his desk. "Something else I didn't miss about starships," he said. "What is it now? More turbulence caused by this nebula?"

But Star shook her head right away. "No, this is something else."

As if to be proven right, the red alert klaxons came to life just then, alerting the crew to imminent danger.

She tapped her combadge. "Star to bridge, what's happening?"

Lieutenant Lance Stanmore responded. "*We have detected a massive plasma overload in the starboard EPS manifold, Commander. It's threatening to reach critical levels. If it does it could lead to severe hull damage and we might lose shields.*"

"Have you been able to localize the source?"

"*It's coming from EPS sub-station three alpha on deck thirteen, section nine.*"

Star had since memorized *Eagle's* deck layout so she immediately knew where the problem was coming from. "That's right below us."

Katanga's eyes went wide.

"Lieutenant, I'll be heading their now. Inform the captain and have damage control meet me there."

"*Star, this is Owens, I just got to the bridge,*" the captain said. "*Let damage control handle this.*"

Tazla Star looked frustrated and she bit her lip just before she shot back: "Understood, sir, Star out," she said, closed the channel and turned towards the doors.

"Where are you going? Didn't he just tell you to —"

“It’s right below us, Eli. I can get there before damage control. Unless you’d prefer to get your floor blown out from under your feet,” she said and was already out of the door by the time she had finished.

The doctor uttered another sigh. “‘Join a starship, Eli,’ she said. ‘See the galaxy,’ she said. ‘Never a dull moment.’ Yeah, she got that one right,” he mumbled before he started to pick up the equipment strewn across the floor. “I’m getting too old for this.”

The turbolift was down the corridor so the better option was the Jeffries tube access panel just opposite from sickbay. She took a knee, unceremoniously removed the cover and slipped inside.

She could feel the heat immediately and understood this to be a bad sign. Starship bulkheads were made out of a duranium polymer which was near indestructible. If she could feel the heat through a number of layers of duranium, there had to be a fire already.

The ladder to reach the deck below was just a short crawl away and upon reaching it she quickly slid down. She crawled a few more meters and then blew out another access cover with her boots.

She got out onto corridor right next to the EPS sub-station. A clearly dazed crewmember was sitting up against the bulkhead, her face and hair dirty from soot and burn marks.

“Lieutenant Smith,” Star said as he approached, recognizing the engineering officer. “What happened?”

The woman looked up but appeared as if she hadn’t understood the question.

Star pointed at the closed doors of the sub-station. Everything looked normal from the outside, but judging from Smith’s appearance and the red alert strobes in the corridor, things were bad inside.

“I ... I’m not sure.”

“Anyone else still in there?”

She shook her head slightly.

It was a frustratingly slow response considering the circumstances. She quickly decided that the woman wouldn’t be of much assistance. She looked down the corridor and when she could find nobody from the damage control team, she decided to have a look herself.

Kate Smith decided to speak up then. “You ... you can’t go in there,” she said. “We ... we have to evacuate ... evacuate the deck. The overload is building up ... catastrophic levels.”

Star looked back at her. "Go ahead and evacuate," she said and turned back towards the doors which of course didn't open, the computer having them sealed shut after detecting the emergency. Star found the manual release hidden within the bulkhead beside it. But the doors still didn't budge, not until she removed a manual override tool, slapping it onto the door and began to pull the panels apart.

She got it open just wide enough to slip through.

Inside she found an inferno in the making.

Hot, green flames had engulfed much of the exposed EPS conduit which transported ultra-hot plasma from the warp core to various other systems across the ship. Something had happened to interrupt that flow which had caused the overload and the resulting fire. Star knew enough about engineering to realize that if something wasn't done quickly, the entire conduit would blow and destroy a huge chunk of *Eagle* along with it. Not to mention her and dozens of other crewmembers.

And perhaps even worse yet, according to Stanmore, this particular station regulated power flow to the main shields. And if they went down they'd be completely exposed to the fatal radiation of the nebula.

The heat was unbearable and her skin had almost instantly broken out in a heavy sweat and in a futile effort to cool it.

She quickly stripped out of her jacket and red shirt and then brought up an arm to cover her mouth and nose to try and keep from breathing in too many of those noxious fumes saturated in the rapidly thinning air.

Her eyes already stung and tears were streaming down her face but there was little she could do about that. Instead she stepped further into the room, desperately trying to remember the exact layout for the controls to tackle such an emergency.

She quickly came to the conclusion that she had two options. Find the fire suppression system which for whatever reason had failed and contain the plasma fires or find the emergency EPS shut-down to deal with the overload.

The fires were bad, the overload was potentially far worse.

After she found the first two consoles she looked at completely destroyed or partially melted, she came across a third station which thankfully was still functional.

She nearly burned her fingers when she tried to touch the control surfaces.

Of course he had no other choice and hit those panels as quickly as she could.

The next ten seconds felt like minutes, with the heat bearing down on her and robbing her of air and strength. Then the panels finally turned from bright red to soothing green and when she looked up, through blurry eyes, she could see that the plasma within the conduit was receding.

Too bad the fire still had enough fuel to burn her alive.

She was determined not to stick around for that, turned towards the exit and high-tailed it out of there.

Out in the corridor she dropped on her hands and knees when her strength had finally given out, coughing hard and eagerly sucking up non-toxic air.

The damage control team came sprinting down the corridor with their firefighting equipment just as she got back on her feet. Kate Smith was nowhere to be seen.

Star pointed a thumb over her shoulder. "I've left you with the clean up," she said and turned away from the surprised members of the damage control team. She couldn't keep a large smirk in check as she walked off. Yes, she had come close to being burnt to a crisp but then what was life without a little challenge now and then?

Day Four: The Woman In White

- I -

The bright light caused her to squint open her eyes and she immediately regretted the decision when her mind was pierced with sensory overload.

She raised an arm to try and shield her face and found that her muscles were stiff and bruised.

Only very slowly did she recall her last conscious thoughts.

A planet where none should have been, losing control of the runabout and watching on helplessly as they plummeted towards the planetoid's surface. A crash landing.

She was lying in a cot in the compact crew compartment and bright sunlight streamed through the small viewport.

Deen tried to stand but was unsuccessful at first when her limbs chose not to respond to her own requests. It took a few seconds before she managed to will herself to sit up and ultimately stand.

She was sans her uniform jacket or golden shirt and she quickly noticed the bruising and cuts on her arms and shoulders which apparently had been recently treated with a dermal regenerator. She also felt the presence of two small medical devices attached to her forehead which likely had helped her recover.

She removed them and then found her shirt and jacket nearby. It took some effort to get her stiff joints to bend enough to allow her to fully dress again.

Next she stepped up to the viewport to get a look at their surroundings. At first look it appeared they had crashed in a canyon of sorts and she could see steep cliff walls any way she looked. The ground looked sandy, amber-colored, like one would typically expect from a desert environment. The sky – the little of it she could see from the small viewport – was mostly gray and white, the few clouds she could spot appeared to be pulsing with energy.

Deen stepped away and left the cabin to head for the cockpit.

“Dee,” Srena immediately exclaimed euphorically when the young pilot saw the woman enter. “Are you alright?”

She offered a little smile in return. “My head still feels as if somebody detonated a photon torpedo inside but otherwise I think I just might make it.”

She saw that Xylion and Leva were also back on their feet. The former was working on one of the few operational computer consoles why Leva turned to look at her. “You may thank the ensign for your recovery. Turns out she’s quite useful to have around. Pilot, part-time medic and astrophysicist. She treated my broken arm with little effort.”

The Andorian blushed, her face turning dark blue. “It’s just what I managed to pick up at the Academy, is all.”

“And to think you only spend three years there,” Leva said with a smirk. “Had you stayed a full four years, you’d probably make us all look superfluous.”

Srena didn’t have words to offer to that.

But Deen smiled. It wasn’t very often, in her experience, that the half-Romulan made new friends. Apparently he had really taken a liking to the perky Andorian and she couldn’t blame him.

“I can’t say I remember much from the landing but it looks like we managed to pull off a minor miracle keeping the runabout in one piece and us along with it,” said Deen and stepped closer to the forward viewports which offered her a better view of the outside than the one in her cabin had.

“It is unlikely that a miracle is to be credited for our fortunate landing,” said the Vulcan without pausing his efforts to work on the computer.

“And we won’t be going anywhere soon, either,” said Srena, now sounding a lot less enthusiastic. “From what we can tell so far, both thrusters and the impulse engine didn’t survive the crash. We’re also without communications and the emergency beacon is damaged.”

“Figures,” said Deen.

“We won’t know the full extend of the damage until we’ve been able to make a full visual inspection,” Leva added.

“What about this rogue planet?” said Deen. “Have we been able to learn anything about it yet?” She could see the canyon stretch on for another few hundred meters until the ground slowly sloped upwards and towards what appeared to be mostly open terrain. But interestingly,

she could now spot sparse vegetation growing in various patches along the canyon floor and even what looked like a small stream of brownish water. The exo-biologist in her was immediately intrigued. "There is life here," she said.

"The planet actually registers as Class-M. There is an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere out there. It's a little thin but breathable. The current temperature outside the runabout measures at thirty-four degrees Celsius and gravity is only slightly higher than standard," said Leva.

Deen turned to look at him. "That's remarkable."

"I think we should get out there and have a look for ourselves," said the eager pilot.

But Xylion appeared less fond of the idea. "There are still questions I would prefer answered before we expose ourselves to the environment. It is unlikely that a rouge planetoid within this nebula would be able to sustain life."

"And yet here we are," said Deen and walked up behind him to look over his shoulder. "Toxicology is negative, air is breathable, there are no signs of contagions in the air or soil and no higher life-forms according to sensors," she added, as she read the latest report he had been able to collate. "I say we go and have a look for ourselves."

"It may not be wise to rush such a decision."

"I don't think we're going to learn a great deal from just sitting in here," she said.

Xylion stood. "You may recall that your previous insistence on altering our planned arrangements has led us into our current predicament."

"Guilty as charged," she said. "But now we have to find a way to get ourselves out of it."

"Not to mention that we will have to carry out external repairs if we want any chance to get her back into the air," offered the Andorian.

Xylion seemed to consider this for a moment, studying the faces of the three officers around him who all seemed united in their opinion. Deen knew that he was the ranking officer and his pragmatism did not generally cause him to change his mind because the majority did not share his view. It didn't stop her to offer him her most insistent look. It had, after all, worked the last time.

“Very well,” he finally said. “We will carry out a cursory survey but we will remain within visual range of the runabout at all times.”

Deen offered a large smile. “You got it.”

As the current tactical officer and former security guard, Leva’s first instinct had been to retrieve four phasers from the weapons locker.

The Tenarian frowned at that. “Is that necessary? There are no higher life forms out there according to sensors?”

But the Romulan was not to be swayed. “Standard procedure, Dee.”

Xylion nodded in agreement and the four officers quickly strapped on the weapons before retrieving a set of tricorders as well and then stepped into the airlock.

“Somebody remind me why I volunteered to step onto a hot and humid desert planet?” said the ensign as soon as she had stepped outside and felt the dry heat hit her like a brick wall.

Deen sympathized with the younger woman. As an Andorian she was naturally more sensitive to extreme heat than the others, hailing from a planet which was mostly ice and snow. It was a few degrees higher than she found comfortable as well and even Leva seemed to suffer a little. Their standard-issue Starfleet uniforms were made of material which was supposed to keep their bodies warm when the temperatures dropped and allow their skin to breath in hot weather but even the intelligent fabric had its limits and apparently it had just been reached.

Xylion was the only member of the team who seemed entirely unaffected by the climate. Not surprisingly, she thought, considering that this almost felt like being on Vulcan.

Deen’s first order of business was to take a soil sample by opening her tricorder, taking a knee and then run the sensor close to the ground. She did the same for the small stream which trickled along the canyon floor and then the few bushes and grasses she could find. “Truly remarkable,” she said again and then looked up at the sky. “There is sufficient air and water here for life but what I can’t quite account for is the light.”

Srena shot her a puzzled look.

“Did you happen to see a star on your way here?”

The Andorian shook her head. “Right. No star, no light.”

Deen nodded.

“The nebula is fairly bright,” said the Romulan. “Perhaps it’s what allowed this planet to thrive.”

“Must be.”

Srena had stepped further away from the runabout and was closely studying some of the ragged cliffs around her. Something in particular seemed to have caught her attention. “Sir,” she called out suddenly.

The others turned to look at her.

“I think I saw something.”

Xylion raised an eyebrow. “Could you be more specific, Ensign?”

“Something’s up there,” she said and pointed at a rock dais further up the cliff. “I swear I saw something move.”

“Maybe a tumble weed,” said Leva.

“I don’t feel any wind,” said Deen.

“Sensors show no indication of any higher life-forms,” added Xylion, “it is unlikely that what you saw was any kind of actual —”

The Vulcan stopped in midsentence when he spotted movement as well.

Deen and the others saw it too. There was something behind the rock and as if startled, it had suddenly moved away from them. It had only been a blur but it had certainly not been a tumble weed.

Srena had instinctively jumped backwards.

The tactical officer raised a hand towards the others, indicating for them to be silent as he freed his phaser and slowly began to move down the canyon and parallel to the movement above. He indicated for Srena to follow him but for her to stay closer to the cliff wall.

Xylion and Deen in the meantime moved towards the other side of the canyon, drawing their weapons also, and hoping to get into a better vantage point to find what was lurking above them.

Whatever it was had clearly been startled and judging by the sounds of skipping rocks above, was now moving at a faster pace, as if to get away from the curious Starfleet away team.

Leva matched the increasingly furious speed and when he spotted a break and sharp turn in the plateau above, he leveled his phaser, expecting to see whatever they were chasing to come into the open for perhaps only a moment.

It did. But it failed to make the turn and slipped instead, causing it to tumble off the cliff and towards the canyon floor some five meters

below. It uttered a very human-like shriek before it landed harshly on the ground.

Leva was the first on the scene but the others were there moments later.

“By Utzvah, it’s a person,” said Srena as soon as she saw the humanoid shape, dressed in a long white dress of sorts.

Deen immediately went to her knees to turn the body and find that it belonged to a woman. She appeared young, no older than herself and with admittedly attractive features, fair skin and long flowing black hair. She was clearly still alive judging from the small groan that escaped her lips. When Deen pushed that hair out of her face to get a better look, her hand brushed against her ear and she felt the distinctive shape. She drew her hair back further and then looked up to give first Leva and then Xylion an astounded look.

Her ears were shaped exactly like theirs.

- II -

“Lieutenant Sirna Kolrami the Younger,” said Nora Laas as she read from her padd and then looked up at the Zakdorn engineer sitting in the chair on the other side of the table, obviously not entirely comfortable being there. “Any relation to *the* Sirna Kolrami?”

“He’s my father,” the man said, immediately sitting up a little straighter and puffing out his chest.

“Forgive my ignorance,” said Alex Clancy as he placed a glass of water in front of the engineering officer. “But who is the Sirna Kolrami?”

Kolrami the Younger was not in a forgiving mood, judging by the icy stare he aimed at the counselor. “My father is the foremost strategic mind within the Federation. Quite honestly, you should probably read up more on those things,” he said and then reached for the glass to take a sip.

The counselor shot a look at Nora who offered a little smirk. “He’s probably right.”

Clancy took a seat next to her. “I’m afraid military strategy was not covered in counselor school,” he said and when he noticed the continued frown on the engineer’s fleshy face, he quickly added: “Something I’m sure they’ll be rectifying soon.”

Nora referred back to her padd. “According to the personnel roster, Mister Kolrami, you were on duty in engineering two nights ago. Is that correct?”

The junior lieutenant gave a quick nod in response. “Correct. Along with Chief Petty Officer Telrik, Crewmen McPhee and Sanzenbacher and Lieutenant Gedar.”

The Bajoran nodded and made notes on her padd. “And according to your statement, you last saw the lieutenant at around 2330 hours when you and the other duty engineers left engineering for various maintenance related work?”

Another curt nod. “Sanzenbacher was already gone by then, working on overhauling a corroded EPS conduit on deck eight. Telrik and McPhee had to recalibrate the plasma injectors in the starboard nacelle’s control room. That left only myself and Gedar when sensors showed anomalous readings for the navigational deflector. I decided to

go and check it out. Since internal sensors are down while we're in the nebula, we get sensor alerts all time and somebody has to look into those."

"So when you left, Gedar was alone in engineering?" Nora asked.

"That is correct."

Clancy leaned forward a little. "Is that unusual? To leave a single person on duty in engineering?"

"Not really," he said. "Not during the night shift." Then he huffed noticeably. "But I should have known better than to leave Gedar by himself. I should have told him to go and check out the deflector instead."

"Why do you say that?"

Kolrami considered the counselor for a moment, almost as if he was trying to ascertain if the man was a telepath like many others who had chosen his profession. However his blue eyes probably ruled him out as a Betazoid. "Gedar had a way to attract trouble, ask anyone. He's been like that ever since he's come aboard. And he got easily distracted by matters unrelated to his work."

"Such as?" Nora said.

The engineer shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I didn't really know him all that well personally but I tell you his mind was not on the job. I can't say if that's what led to his demise or not but I'm sure it didn't help." He took another sip of the water.

"You didn't like him very much, did you?" the counselor asked.

Kolrami looked right into the other man's eyes before responding. "He wasn't the greatest engineer I've ever met but he was decent enough," he said and then diverted his glance. "As I said I didn't know him outside of engineering. I just needed him to do his job."

Nora referred back to the padd. "We have determined that Gedar was killed at around 2345 –"

"I was at deflector control. You can check the log."

The security chief nodded. "We did and according to the log you were. From what we can tell, you were the last person to see Gedar alive when you left engineering. Did you notice anything suspicious at the time? With him or anyone else?"

"No."

Nora and Clancy exchanged quick looks at the prompt response.

"Nothing at all?" the counselor asked.

"If there had been something suspicious, I wouldn't have left him by himself."

"Alright," said Clancy. "How about in the last few days then? Anything unusual about him? Did he act differently perhaps?"

"He was talking a great deal about his play and how wonderful it had been and how he hoped to perform it again soon. Mentioned how the captain had congratulated him personally."

"Did you see it?" Clancy asked.

Kolrami shot the man a look as if he had just lost his mind. "No, I have not."

"Shame," he said. "It was pretty good."

"If you say so. Now, is there anything else? I really should be getting back to engineering. We're quite busy with the sensor array and as you can imagine, now that we're a man down, it's more work for the rest of us."

"We understand," Nora said. "Thank you for your time, Lieutenant. We may have more questions for you later."

The Zakdorn huffed a little, before he quickly stood and strode out of the interview room.

Clancy watched him leave. "Charming fellow."

"Zakdorns aren't known for their charisma," said Nora as she made a few more notes on the padd.

The counselor was still looking at the now closed doors when he spoke. "It's obvious there was no love lost between him and Gedar. I think he warrants another look."

"Perhaps. But Kolrami has been a distinguished engineer in Starfleet for a long time and has been on *Eagle* for the last two years. Not to mention he's clearly incredibly proud of his family's heritage. I can't see him doing anything to bring shame to it."

Clancy stood. "Good point," he said and then turned back to look at the Bajoran. "But we'll have to look past those considerations if we want to find whoever did this. Most murderers haven't been born or bred to kill people in cold blood. But at some point, regardless of their own moral standards or their upbringing, they snap and do the previously unthinkable."

Nora folded her arms in front of her chest. "Alright then, you're the expert here, Counselor. What is it that made Lieutenant Junior Grade Kolrami snap and turn into a cold-blooded killer?"

He shot her a boyish grin. "Maybe he really hates Shakespeare."

* * *

"He seemed like a very gifted young man to me, very charismatic as well. What a horrible tragedy for somebody to die like this. So very sad," said Erez Rosenthal, the professor was sitting in the interview room, facing both Nora and Clancy, while he was cleaning his spectacles with a cloth. "The big reason why we're out here," he said and put his glasses back on, "is to make sure to stop all this senseless killing we've been seeing ever since this cursed war started. My array will give us a tactical advantage we've never had before," he added and then shook his head. "But then to learn that somebody died in such a way for no reason at all, it's just such a terrible tragedy."

"Indeed, it is," said Nora and referred to her padd. "Now according to our initial interviews, you had a meeting with Lieutenant Gedar on the night he was killed, is that correct?"

"A meeting?" He seemed momentarily confused.

The security chief checked her padd again. "According to what we've been told; you, your assistant Miss Colcord, Lieutenant Hopkins and Gedar were having a meeting to discuss the progress on the sensor array that night."

"Oh yes, of course," he said quickly, nodding along. "We needed to go through some of the details pertaining to the second phase of the project and regarding attaching the sensor modules to the array framework and the resources required for that operation."

"How come Gedar was in attendance?" said Clancy who differently to the security chief, was leaning back in his chair, seeming almost relaxed as he studied the professor on the other side of the table.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well, you had to be there of course, it's your project. And I assume Miss Colcord is probably also quite essential. Lieutenant Hopkins is the chief engineer but Gedar was a junior officer. Third or fourth in line in engineering?" he said and looked at Nora for clarification.

"Fourth," she said.

The counselor looked back at the professor. "I'm just curious to know what his purpose was at the meeting. From what others have told us, he wasn't even that good of an engineer."

"Mister Gedar is ... I mean was quite an accomplished man, I'm not sure why you would have been told otherwise," Rosenthal said, prompting the two Starfleet officers to exchange quick glances. "I believe Ms. Hopkins wanted him along. He had some ... uh ... ideas regarding the project. Some of them where quite interesting."

"Interesting?" Colcord said, when it was her turn in the seat and after the professor had departed. "I wouldn't necessarily call them interesting. Starfleet officers like to brainstorm ideas all the time but unfortunately they have very little discipline," she added. "No offense." The young woman quickly continued. "Anyway, Gedar was no different. He had an opinion on pretty much everything and for some reason Lieutenant Hopkins seemed to encourage it. I believe she thought quite highly of him. But the truth is, we didn't come here to discuss the sensor array or the shield modifications. They are already working exactly the way they should. We are here to put together this array. And in very little time, I should add. So the sooner we can wrap this up, the sooner I can go back and ensure it goes up before we all die of radiation poisoning."

Both Nora and Clancy needed a second to catch up with everything that had come over her lips in her rapid-fire speech.

Nora looked at her padd. "What time did this meeting start?"

Colcord uttered a little sigh. "About 2320. Maybe 30, I don't recall precisely, I wasn't looking at a chronometer at the time."

The Bajoran nodded. "And what time did it finish?"

"That would have been when Lieutenant Hopkins got the call about Gedar being found in engineering. That must have been around 0045 hours."

"So Gedar left the meeting at some point?" Clancy asked.

Louise Hopkins nodded slowly but didn't answer the question.

Nora actually put the padd on the table and leaned forward, reaching out for the engineer's hand. "Are you alright, Lou? We can talk later about this if you don't feel up to it."

The engineer shook her head. "No, no it's alright. It's just tough, you know. I'm really trying hard not to think about what happened to him because when I do think about it..." she stopped herself again. "It's not as if I haven't lost people over the last few years. Accidents happen all the time. Somebody stands too close to an exploding EPS conduit when it blows in battle, some Jem'Hadar ship gets in a lucky shot, somebody gets burned by plasma, but those are the risks which are inherent to the job. War casualties," she said.

"I know it's difficult," Nora told her friend.

The young engineer took a deep breath and then looked back at the counselor who offered a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry, what was the question?"

"Lieutenant Gedar left the meeting early. What time was that?"

"Pretty early on. Maybe five or ten minutes after we started."

"And why was that?" he asked.

"Rosenthal and Colcord weren't particularly happy for him to be there," she said. "I mean they barely tolerate me but as they need our people and resources to build this array of theirs, I suppose I was not optional. Gedar was."

Nora peeked up at that. "Were they hostile towards him?"

"Uh ... I don't know if I'd call it hostility," she said, not sounding so entirely sure of herself. "Maybe more indifferent than hostile. Especially Colcord. She really doesn't like Starfleet or maybe Starfleet engineers. I thought that was odd because Jin had some very good ideas about improving their shield modifications further. But she was adamant that it was good enough already and that they didn't need any Starfleet design input."

"So they didn't get along?" said Nora.

"I don't think it was personal," Hopkins said. "She didn't really care for anyone in my team and I don't think she expected anyone else in the meeting apart from me."

"Lieutenant Kolrami mentioned that Gedar wasn't a particularly good engineer," said Clancy.

Hopkins shot the counselor an astonished look.

"That wasn't the case?" he said.

“He could be a little unfocused at times, I suppose. He’d been spending a lot of time lately on that play he was in and perhaps some of his colleagues felt that he was neglecting his duties.”

“Did Kolrami have more of an issue with that than others?” Clancy continued.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But Kolrami and Gedar were up for the same position in engineering and Zakdorn can be quite blunt and undiplomatic, especially when they’re after something,” she said but then quickly looked guilty over what she had said. “Sorry, that probably didn’t sound right.”

“It’s fine, Lou,” Nora said. “And you are right about the Zakdorn. But their assertive nature does not make them killers,” she added and aimed a sidelong look at Clancy.

“Of course not,” she said quickly. “I’ve worked with Kolrami for years and I can vouch for him. He can be difficult at times but he’d never hurt a colleague.”

“Could you think of anyone who may have had reason to?”

Hopkins hesitated for a moment, briefly glancing away. “No,” she said.

“If he didn’t have any enemies on board,” Clancy said, “who were his friends?”

“We’re two out of maybe half a dozen Krellonian’s in Starfleet,” Lif Culsten said. “Yeah, we knew each other.”

“How well?” said Clancy as he considered the helmsman whose features were not all that dissimilar from Gedar’s. His skin was lighter but he possessed the same earless head and long, fine, silver hair.

“We talked socially from time to time. He had some problems adjusting to life outside the Star Alliance and I was happy to help him where I could.”

“Anything in particular he had problems with?” Nora said as she made notes.

He considered that for a moment. “My people have some, I guess you would call them old-fashioned views, about gender roles.”

Nora raised her eyebrows. “Lovely. I had no idea.”

“I don’t share those views, Lieutenant.”

She nodded slowly but skeptically. "So what? Gedar saw women as inferior to him?"

He quickly shook his head. "No, not inferior. Quite the opposite really. He worshipped women."

Nora looked confused.

"I think what the lieutenant is trying to say is that Gedar was a bit of a ladies' man."

"I believe that is the term."

The Bajoran security chief nodded. "Was he seeing somebody on *Eagle*?"

"For many of my people it is almost unthinkable not to be engaged in some sort of relationship with the opposite sex at all times. And Gedar was very much of that same persuasion. He called it his weakness."

Nora rolled her eyes and Clancy smirked.

"Do you know who he was involved with?"

"A Bajoran Marine. I think her name is Yunta," he said. "Yes, Yunta Fey."

- III -

"You're saying you were in here when this happened?"

"It wasn't a pleasant experience," said Star while she leaned against one of the very few bulkheads in the room which were not covered with soot and grime. She had her arms crossed in front of her chest and watched as Hopkins and a pair of technicians were going through what remained of the EPS substation.

"No kidding," said the chief engineer. "It must have been near sixty degrees in here when the plasma fire broke out."

"What are your findings?"

Hopkins, wearing a plain, mustard-colored jumpsuit was on her hands and knees trying to gain access to the flashpoint of the fire. "So far, I haven't found anything yet that could shed light on what caused the rupture. It almost looks as if—"

"Lieutenant."

Hopkins got on her feet and turned to one of her engineers.

"Have a look at this?" the man said and handed her a palm-sized device, blackened and singed by the fire but otherwise apparently still in one piece.

She took it off his hands and inspected it closely. "Now that's interesting."

Star stepped closer. "What is it?"

"This," she said, "is the emergency shut-off seal for the EPS conduit. The very same which should prevent an accident like this to happen."

"It failed?" the Trill asked.

Hopkins shook head. "It worked perfectly."

"I don't understand."

"Commander, there is nothing wrong with the seal. In theory it should have activated and immediately stopped the plasma flow after detecting the rupture."

"But it didn't. Why?"

Hopkins shrugged her small shoulders. "Honestly? Beats me."

The first officer frowned at that, not happy with that explanation at all.

“The only way I can see this could have happened is if ...” apparently she didn’t want to finish her own thought.

“If what, Lieutenant?”

She uttered a sigh. “If somebody purposefully tried to cause the EPS overload and circumvented the emergency seal.”

The Trill considered that for a moment.

“But it makes no sense, Commander,” she added quickly. “If we hadn’t gotten the EPS rupture under control when we did, we would have lost shields protecting half the ship. We would have been exposed to the nebula’s radiation.”

“Meaning we would have had to abandon our current mission to build the sensor array.”

Hopkins nodded slowly but apparently not quite on the same page as the XO yet. It took her a couple of seconds to catch up. “Wait, you’re saying somebody is trying to sabotage this mission?”

“What can you tell me about Katherine Smith?”

“Kate?” she said, momentarily dumbfounded by the new line of inquiry. “She’s been on *Eagle* for as long as I’ve been here. Day one. She’s one of my best people. Dedicated, hard-working, skilled at her job.”

“She was the only person who accessed this substation yesterday, wasn’t she?”

“Yes, but —”

“She had both opportunity and the knowledge to carry out an intentional overload of the EPC conduit.”

“Yes but no reason,” Hopkins said quickly, desperate to defend her man. “I know Kate. We spend time together off-duty on occasions. We’ve been on shore leave together. She’s not a saboteur. She’d have no reason to be. This makes no sense.”

But Star considered the other woman suspiciously. “Then give me another explanation?”

Clearly Hopkins didn’t have one.

The Trill turned and headed for the exit and the chief engineer followed closely. Outside they found Kate Smith near the very bulkhead where Star had found her, cowering on the floor after the fire had started. An armed security guard was standing watch over the woman as to Star’s orders.

She knew that technically this fell into the security chief's department but Star had pulled rank and done an end around Nora Laas. After all these events were fitting perfectly into her theory of an enemy spy operating on board. She hadn't shared those views with anyone except for Katanga but given current events, it would become difficult not to draw the conclusions she already had. But the last thing she wanted was to get Nora involved. Besides the security chief was busy with the murder investigation and while there was a chance that these events were related, so far there was no evidence connecting the two. She did not rule it out, of course, and her saboteur could have very easily have been the same person responsible for killing Lieutenant Gedar. Right now that person appeared to be Lieutenant Junior Grade Kate Smith.

The slim, dark-haired engineer watched Star and Hopkins emerge with large eyes, apparently anxious as to their findings. She didn't appear encouraged by the dour look on her boss' face.

Star cut right to the chase. "No mechanical fault whatsoever," she said to the woman.

"I ... I don't understand," Smith said.

"Then let me clarify," said Star and crossed her arms again. "Either you caused the overload accidentally due to negligence on your part or you did so purposefully with the intention of harming this ship and her crew."

Smith immediately shook her head. "No, no that can't be."

The XO glanced at the chief engineer. "You told me Lieutenant Smith is a competent engineer who is fully able to operate the EPS substation safely and without causing an accident. Am I also correct in saying that even if there had been some sort of equipment malfunction, she would have been able to take quick corrective actions to avoid what took place here yesterday?"

Hopkins didn't respond straight away. Instead she kept her focus on her engineer who was pleading with her eyes. Then she nodded.

"I'm sorry, I didn't get that," said Star.

Hopkins swallowed before speaking. "Yes. With the emergency seal fully in tact, she should have been able to shut-off the plasma flow at the first sign of trouble, even if it didn't engage automatically."

Star turned back to look at Smith.

"I ... I can't explain it," she stammered. "I simply don't know what happened. I mean ... I was there and there was no sign of any malfunction. The plasma flow was ... it was normal, I'm sure of it."

"Then what caused the rupture, Lieutenant?" Star asked.

"I ... " she clearly had no explanation to offer, instead her eyes were starting to become moist. "I don't know," she finally said and hung her head.

"Lieutenant, I'm removing you from active duty and you are restricted to quarters until further notice and pending a full investigation of what happened here. Crewman, please escort the lieutenant to her quarters."

The security guard nodded and when Smith didn't move, she prodded her gently until the engineer began to head down the corridor, the armed guard staying two steps behind her.

Hopkins watched her engineer leave. "It's going to be very difficult for us to keep on schedule with the array without having her around. It's the second good man I've lost on my team."

"Pull people from other departments if you must but I'm not taking the risk of having a possible saboteur walking around freely on the ship. Not while we have a killer onboard as well."

"Wait," she said and turned to face the Trill. "You don't think Kate—"

"I don't know yet but I can't see how we can rule anything out at this point," she said and then looked at the fire damaged EPS substation. "I know you're already stretched thin but I need you to put a team together to fine comb through that room and find out exactly how she caused the rupture."

"Internal sensors were non-operational, we're going to have limited data to analyze."

"Do what you can. I expect a full report within twenty-four hours," Star said and then walked away.

- IV -

"I suppose this is how things worked before internal sensors," said Alex Clancy as he walked down the corridor with Nora Laas at his side. "Can you even imagine not being able to rely on something we now take for granted?"

The Bajoran aimed a frown in his direction. "We didn't have internal sensors in the resistance on Bajor."

Clancy looked pained. "Of course not, sorry."

"I still don't understand why we are doing it this way," she said, apparently quite happy not to dwell on her past. "We could have easily commed her and have her report to the security office."

"Yunta Fey is our first suspect outside of engineering we haven't spoken to yet," he said. "I want to see her reaction when she hears about Gedar's death."

"Is that a trick you picked up in your vast investigative career, Lieutenant?"

Clancy ignored the sarcasm in her tone. "It's simple psychology. Most people are unable to hide their true feelings when they are caught by surprise. It may only last a second but sometimes that's enough."

"Just remember, last time I checked you can't prosecute somebody based on their feelings."

"Not in the Federation, no," he said with a little smirk and then pointed to the two wooden doors they were approaching, embossed with a large Starfleet delta in a transparent inset. "According to Major Wasco, we'll find the corporal in here. Sounds like she's one of the few Marines who likes to mix with the Starfleet crew."

They entered the Nest, *Eagle's* largest crew lounge located at the very front of deck ten. The two-level room offered relaxed seating arrangements below and replicators and dining tables above.

The Nest was busy which didn't come as much of a surprise considering that the majority of the crew was not while they were parked in the nebula, constructing the sensors array. And of course the large panorama windows allowed one of the best views of their mesmerizing surroundings and many were taking full advantage of this.

Bensu, *Eagle's* enigmatic bartender appeared out of seemingly nowhere to greet his latest guests. "Welcome to the Nest, may I interest you in some refreshments?"

But before Nora could speak, the dark-skinned man with his white bony ridges protruding from his otherwise hairless scalp beat her to it. "You're here on official business, aren't you?"

"How can you tell?"

"It's that look in your eyes, Alex," he said. "You are here because of what happened in engineering."

"How do you know about that?" Nora said, sounding almost accusatory now. After all they had agreed with the captain to delay the official announcement for twenty-four hours in order to give them a head start of catching the perpetrator.

He smiled sadly. "It's very difficult to keep a secret on a starship no matter how hard you try."

Nora wanted to respond but something in his look changed her mind. She had once tried to keep a secret on this ship too and it hadn't worked out very well. She didn't want to think of the painful emotions the thought stirred up in her.

As if he could sense that pain, Bensu quickly moved on. "Is there somebody specific you are looking for?"

"Lance Corporal Yunta Fey," Clancy said.

"Yes, she's here," he said and pointed at the far corner of the room where a woman sat by herself at a table, staring off into the nebula and sipping at her drink. "A remarkable woman, that one. Strong and determined, a warrior through and through," he added and then looked back at Nora.

She nodded along.

"I can see why you would want to talk to her."

"Why is that?" said Clancy.

"I couldn't tell you for certain," the bartender said, "but I think she knew Gedar. I may have seen them together a couple of times."

"Thank you," Nora said in a clipped tone and headed in the direction of where Yunta was sitting.

Clancy caught up quickly. "Not very tactful, Lieutenant."

"I don't trust the man," she said in a near whisper. "He knows too much, it creeps me out."

He uttered a little laugh.

“Lance Corporal Yunta Fey,” Nora said as they stepped up to the table.

The woman turned to look at the two Starfleet officers. Bensusan hadn't been wrong about her. Even sitting down it was clear Yunta was a fighter, possessing strong shoulders and a muscular build and a hard look in her bright blue eyes. She was also, however, undeniably attractive and apparently without having to give it much effort. She had naturally high cheekbones, flawless skin and silky blonde hair which she currently wore down to her neck. “Yes?”

“I'm Lieutenant Nora Laas, this is Lieutenant Clancy. May we sit down and talk to you?”

She nodded and the two took seats opposite her.

“I know you, Lieutenant. You are the chief of security.”

Nora nodded.

“You are from Rakantha Province, aren't you?” she continued. “I remember reading about you and your sister. Leena, was it? You raised some serious hells for the Cardies back in the resistance. I was too young to join at the time but after reading about what you did at an early age, I couldn't wait to get my hands around their murderous throats.”

“Did you join?”

“Yes but by then you had left Bajor,” she said this without accusation or bitterness which Bajorans who stayed behind often felt for those who had fled before their home world was liberated. “I don't blame you for doing that. Tell you the truth, I would've left too if I'd had the chance. Couldn't get out quickly enough after the Cardies left. Joint Starfleet's Marines.”

“It's a good place to be.”

She nodded and took another drink. “It's what we Bajorans are good at. Killing spoon-heads.”

Nora cringed a little at the derogative term she herself hadn't used since her days fighting the Cardassians in the border wars as a Marine but Yunta didn't seem to notice.

“So how may I help you?” she said. “I doubt you came to see me just to reminisce about the good old days.”

“We're investigating the murder of Lieutenant Gedar,” said Clancy.

The Marine looked at him, her expression seemingly carefully schooled. "Gedar is dead?"

"He was killed yesterday in engineering between 2330 and midnight," the assistant counselor said.

Yunta said nothing, her empty eyes focused on Clancy as if they were engaged in some sort of staring contest.

"We understand you knew Gedar quite well?" said Nora.

But Yunta still didn't react.

"Corporal?"

She turned to look at Nora. "Yes. Yes, I knew him."

But Nora's asking expression was not rewarded with an answer. "How well?"

"Are you asking me if we had sexual congress?"

Clancy and Nora exchanged a quick, surprised look, neither having expected such a frank response. Clancy took that one. "Well, I wouldn't have gone there straight away but sure, I suppose that's what we're asking."

"I don't mince words, Lieutenant," she said. "And yes, we had an intimate relationship at one point. But I would appreciate if this information did not find it's way back to Major Wasco."

"You can be assured of our discretion on that matter, Corporal," said Nora.

"You said at one point," Clancy continued. "Does that mean you were no longer in a relationship with him?"

She sipped her drink again before responding. "It ended a few months ago."

"Who ended it?" Clancy asked.

She considered that for a moment. "It was a mutual decision."

The counselor did not look convinced at all and even Yunta could tell. "Listen, I'd be lying if I said that what we had wasn't extremely stimulating for the both of us. But that's all it was. Physical. We both understood this and decided to move on."

"Would you happen to know who he moved on to?" said Nora.

"Excuse me?"

Clancy clarified. "Was there a woman he was involved with after you two broke it off?"

"I believe so, yes."

Clancy looked a little exasperated. "And would you happen to know her name?"

The Marine seemed momentarily lost, staring passed both Starfleet officers and into the nebula behind them.

"Corporal?" Clancy said.

"Sierra Decaux," she finally said. "I have to report back to my unit. I'm sure you know where to find me if you need anything else," she added hastily, finished her drink with one last gulp and stood.

"Yes," Nora said, clearly caught on the back foot a little by her sudden move.

"One more question before you go, Corporal," Clancy said, looking up and finding Yunta almost six feet tall. "Where were you between 2330 and midnight on that day?"

"In my quarters," she said. "Sleeping."

"Alone?" Clancy said.

"I'm afraid so," she added and then turned and walked away.

They both watched her leave.

"What a charmer," said Clancy.

Nora shot him a dark look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You have to admit she doesn't exactly possess the greatest set of social skills."

"She doesn't have to," she countered. "She's a Marine."

"I'm sorry I didn't know those two qualities were mutually exclusive."

Nora leaned back in her chair a bit. "She couldn't have had an easy life. Young women that looked like her on Bajor were prime candidates to become courtesans for the Cardassian leadership. And often they were not treated very well."

"She looks like she can handle herself in a fight."

But Nora shook her head. "She wasn't always the strong fighter she is now, I'm sure of it. I was a slim little thing when I first started out in the resistance. I learned a few tricks along the way and became a decent shot and handy with a knife but it wasn't until I joined the Marines that I turned into a true warrior with the kind of deadly skills I wish I'd have had back in the resistance."

"So what you're saying is that she's got the strength and the resolve to kill."

The security chief didn't like the sound of that. "Just because she can do it doesn't mean she did, Lieutenant."

"Of course not but let's recap what we've learned, shall we? She has no alibi. She has a connection to the victim, perhaps even a motive if he wronged her somehow which considering his reputation is a good possibility and she had the opportunity."

Nora stood and began heading for the exit. "I'm not willing to consider that just yet."

Clancy followed suit. "Don't get blinded by the fact that she reminds you of yourself. She may have had a similar journey but you are not the same person."

"I realize that," she said a little too quickly. "Let's go find Decaux."

Xylion had quite effortlessly swooped up the unconscious young woman and brought her into the back compartment of the runabout where they had placed her onto an empty cot.

"Other than a few scrapes, she seems uninjured," said Srena who was running a medical tricorder of her still body, the slight rise and fall of her chest giving proof that she was indeed alive.

"Can you verify her race?" asked Deen who stood close by and like the others had been unable to take her eyes off the mystery woman.

"Oh, she's definitely Vulcan. According to this she's about nineteen or twenty years old," the Andorian said.

"How can this be?" said Leva, his arms crossed in front of his broad chest.

Srena shot him a look and shrugged, obviously this was not a question her tricorder could answer.

"Are you able to wake her?" Xylion wanted to know.

"Wait a minute," said Deen and stepped closer. "Are we sure that's a good idea? We don't have the slightest clue who she is or how she came to be here."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "Precisely. The only person who can answer those questions is her."

"I agree with Xylion," the tactical officer added. "Besides, it's obvious she's already seen us. She was watching us while we were disembarking the runabout."

"Yes, and scared her half to death. Literally," said Deen.

"Wake her, Ensign," the Vulcan said.

Srena aimed a quick look at the still skeptical Deen but then retrieved a hypo-spray, checked the content and then applied it to the woman's neck where it emptied into her system with a little hiss.

It didn't take long for the girl in the white dress to stir. Then she uttered a little moan and reached for her head.

The four Starfleet officers watched quietly and with obvious anticipation as she slowly recovered from her fall.

"Perhaps you should attempt to speak to her first, Lieutenant," Xylion said.

“Let the people person break the ice, I get it,” she said and took a small step towards the cot.

The Vulcan woman opened her eyes and not a moment later jerked up into a sitting position, clearly disturbed as to where she found herself.

“Hello there. Don’t be alarmed,” said Deen with her most charming smile which usually managed to break just about any kind of tension she faced. “You’re on a Starfleet—”

That’s as far she got. The woman was on her feet instantly and before even appraising her situation, she struck out at the first person she saw. And she did so with surprising quickness and strength, hitting the totally unprepared Deen right under her chin and sending her crashing to the floor.

“Whoa, easy there,” Srena said, palms facing the startled woman.

But the short Andorian was also unprepared for the woman’s ferocity and was promptly shoved harshly into the bulkhead, causing her to groan in pain by the sudden impact.

Once passed Srena, she vaulted over the table in the middle of the room to get to the back of the runabout and the large viewports which offered her a view she was likely more familiar with. She pressed herself against the transparent aluminum but quickly found that she would not be able to escape through there.

She whirled back around and found a door at the opposite side of the room, almost leaping towards it.

“We are trying to help you,” said Leva who stepped up to the door to block her way.

She spun around again so suddenly that she lost her balance and fell to the floor only to jump back up and head into the opposite direction. She ran right into a brick wall. Or at least that’s what it must have felt for her when she bumped into Xylion who hardly moved from the impact at all. The woman landed by his feet.

The science officer reached down, picked her up by her shoulders and pulled her up almost effortlessly. “You are Vulcan,” he said.

She didn’t fight his strong grip, instead she simply stared back at him, almost as if she recognized this stranger.

Xylion let her go when she was back on her feet and she made no more apparent attempts to run.

“I am ... Vulcan,” she said gingerly. “What ... are you?”

He considered her for a moment. Then he raised his hand to offer the traditional salute of his people. "I am as well."

She looked at the hand gesture curiously and then tried to emulate it but her small fingers didn't quite get the v-shape right.

He noticed her difficulty. "Fascinating."

"Who ... who are you?" she said.

"I am Lieutenant Commander Xylion, chief science officer of the Starfleet vessel *USS Eagle*. We mean you no harm. There is no need for you to be afraid."

"I am *not* afraid."

"Could have fooled me," said Leva and tended to Deen, helping her back on her feet even while she rubbed her bruised chin.

"These are my colleagues," said Xylion. "They were trying to help you."

The woman looked around to see, perhaps for the first time, the chaos she had caused, including knocking down two of the strangers as well as equipment and a fruit bowl which had stood on the table she had leaped over.

"While your actions may have been explicable," Xylion continued, "they were entirely unwarranted."

"I second that," Deen mumbled, still unable to open her jaw fully after the blow she'd taken.

"What is your name?" the science officer asked.

The woman turned back to consider Xylion. "Tela."

"How did you get to be on this planet?"

She looked confused by that question.

Leva stepped closer carefully. "Tela, my name is So'Dan. Where are you from? Where do you live?"

"Are you Vulcan as well?" she asked him, noticing the similarly shaped ears.

He smirked. "Not quite. But I can see how one can make that mistake."

She nodded. "This is my home."

"You live here?" said Deen who had replicated a small ice bag which she now kept pressed against her chin.

Tela seemed suddenly disturbed and took a couple of steps towards the Tenarian. "I have hurt you," she said.

She waved it off. "I've had worse."

Leva offered a dry smile. "But getting hit in the face is not the reaction DeMara is used to."

Deen aimed a dark look into his direction.

The young woman noticed the pilot next.

The Andorian tried to be as cavalier about it and offered a smile. "I'm fine, don't worry about it. My name is Srena by the way."

Tela nodded slowly.

"You were telling us that you live here," said Deen. "Where exactly?"

"We have a village about an hour's walk from here."

Xylion seemed intrigued. "How many Vulcans live there?"

She looked back at him and considered that question as if it sounded entirely odd to her. "We are all Vulcans."

"I don't know about you guys," said Deen, her jaw clearly doing a lot better now, "but I think I want to see that."

- VI -

Nora pressed the annunciator and after waiting a few seconds, the doors to the private quarters opened to reveal a young woman of about twenty-three years who was mostly the exact opposite of what Yunta Fey had been. At least in height, posture and build. Smaller, shorter and much less muscular, she was clearly not the fighter the Bajoran Marine had been. But that didn't make her any less attractive with her similar blonde hair, large eyes and button nose. She wore a long white shirt with matching loose pants.

"Crewman Sierra Decaux?" Nora asked.

Her eyes widened when she realized her visitors were officers and she quickly jumped to attention. "Yes, ma'am."

"As you were," the Bajoran said.

The woman relaxed but only very hesitantly.

"I'm Alex Clancy and this is Lieutenant Nora Laas. May we come in?"

She looked confused at the request. "Come in?"

The counselor offered a smile meant to put her at ease. "We'd like to talk to you if you don't mind. However if this is not a good time, we can come back later."

The security chief aimed a rather incredulous look at her partner. Obviously he had improvised that line.

But it had the intended effect and the young woman seemed to relax somewhat. "No, of course you may come in," she said and stepped away to let them enter. "It's just, I wasn't expecting any visitors and uh ... I didn't really clean up or anything."

"That's understandable," he said as he walked passed her. "And don't worry, this is not an inspection of your quarters."

The place was a bit of a mess. She shared a modest living room with four other crewmembers so it wasn't easy to tell if all clothes, uneaten foodstuffs and knickknacks belonged to just her or her roommates.

By the embarrassed blush on her face and the way she desperately darted around the room, picking up various items only to then struggle to find a place for them to go, it was a good guess that most of it

belonged to her. "If you give me a minute, sir, I'll just get this right in order and –"

"Sierra."

She stopped in her tracks and looked back at Clancy.

"It's alright, really."

She looked not convinced at all.

"Hang on," he said as if he recognized something about her. "You were in the play weren't you? You're Miranda."

That did the trick and she broke out in a beaming smile, the state of the room suddenly forgotten.

"Boy, you were really good in that," he said.

"Thanks but it wasn't just me, you know, we all rehearsed really hard for that. We're hoping to put on another show next week."

At that Clancy cringed a little.

"Can we sit down, Crewman?" Nora asked.

"I'm sorry, I forgot my manners, please," she said hurried over to the sofa to clear off a few pieces of pink, non-regulation underwear, quickly dumping them out of sight, her face bright red yet again.

The two lieutenants sat and Clancy gestured towards the lounge chair opposite him. Decaux needed a moment to understand what he meant before she gingerly sat on it.

"Crewman, how would you describe your relationship to Lieutenant Gedar?"

"Jin?" she said, once again caught off-guard. "I mean, I know the lieutenant, we were in the play together and we rehearsed quite a bit. He also helped us calibrate some of our lab equipment."

"You're a research assistant in astrophysics?" asked Nora, referring to her padd.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you have been on *Eagle* for eight months, is that right?" she said.

Decaux nodded. "Came on board straight out of basic training. They told us they needed every able person to serve to fight the Dominion and I was happy to sign-up and do my part. However small that might be."

"Sierra, you mentioned you knew Gedar from the play and when he came to the lab but did you ever meet him on other occasions?"

"I'm not sure ... uh ... what you mean," she said, doing an awful job of trying to deflect the question.

Clancy offered another smile. "Sierra, there is no regulation that forbids fraternization between the crew and officers."

She nodded slowly but didn't say anything further, probably fully aware that even though he was right, Starfleet tended to discourage such practices.

Nora was not patient enough to let this drag on. "Crewman, please answer this question for me. Did you have a romantic relationship with Lieutenant Gedar?"

"Is that what he said?"

Nora sighed.

Clancy leaned forward. "Sierra, Lieutenant Gedar is dead. He was killed in engineering two nights ago."

"What? No," she said and jumped onto her feet. "That's not possible."

"Sierra, please –"

"He can't be dead he was just ... I mean how is that possible?" she nearly cried, her eyes rapidly becoming wet. "There must be some sort of mistake."

"I'm afraid not," Clancy said.

She began to pace the room. "My god, my god, my god."

"Sierra, I know this is hard but try to calm down, okay? Take a seat, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths, trust me it helps."

She nodded and then followed his instructions.

"This hurts right now, I know," he continued while she had her eyes closed. "And it'll hurt for some time before it gets better. But right now you have to understand that there is nothing we can do for Gedar anymore except trying to find who did this to him and bring him or her to justice."

She opened her eyes again.

"I take it the answer to my questions is yes, then," said Nora Laas. Decaux shot her an empty look.

"You were involved with him?"

She nodded very slowly.

"How long have you been seeing him?" she said.

Decaux considered that for a moment. "About three months, I think."

The security chief made notes in her padd.

"Wait, you don't think I had something to do with his death, do you?" she asked suddenly, sounding almost panicked at the thought. "Because I would never be able to hurt anyone. You have to believe me."

Nora looked up suspiciously. "You went through basic training, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you learned combat skills there? Hand-to-hand fighting, weapons training and the like?"

"Yes but really just the absolute basics," she said quickly. "I went through the accelerated program because of the war. Most of my training was focused on astrophysics."

"We understand that, Sierra but we have to investigate every lead. Where were you two nights ago between 2330 and zero-hundred hours?" the counselor asked.

She considered that for a moment. A very long moment. Then she looked up. "I was here in my quarters."

"Will your roommates be able to corroborate that?" Nora asked.

"Uh, I don't know, we all have different shifts, it's kind of rare we see each other at all."

Nora made more notes.

"Can you think of anyone who might have held a grudge against Gedar?" Clancy said.

"Not really, no," she said quickly.

"Maybe somebody he worked with in engineering?" he prodded. "Perhaps he mentioned something to you?"

She thought about that one. "He did say that there was this engineer he worked with, a Zakdorn I think, who didn't like him and was jealous of him."

"Did he say anything else? About him or anyone else?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Okay, thanks Sierra, I think we better leave you alone now unless you have any more questions, Lieutenant," Clancy said and looked at Nora.

"Not right now but maybe later," she said and stood.

Clancy followed suit and after a moment so did Decaux.

"I'm going to see what I can do to get you a couple of days off, Sierra, would you like that?"

She nodded delicately.

"Thank you for your time," he said, "I know you're hurting, Sierra and while it may not feel like it right now, it's going to get better," he added with a genuine smile.

The two investigators headed for the door but just before they reached them, Clancy turned back around. "There is just one more thing," he said and referred back to his padd. "Do you know a Marine corporal by the name of Yunta Fey?"

"Uh, what?"

"Corporal Yunta," Clancy repeated. "She's Bajoran. Do you know of her?"

"I'm not ... sure."

"Apparently she was seeing Gedar up until recently," said Nora. "She pointed us in your direction."

At that her eyes widened.

Clancy took a step towards her. "You must have known about the lieutenant's reputation."

She nodded after a moment.

"Crewman, is there any possibility that Lieutenant Gedar was involved with anyone else? Perhaps even while he was with you?"

"I ... " she couldn't say it and looked away instead.

Clancy took a few more steps towards the young woman. "Sierra, this is very important," he said. "Did you have any suspicions somebody else may have been involved?"

She made eye contact with the counselor but didn't speak straight away. It took her moment to find her voice again. "Yes."

"Who?" Nora wanted to know.

She shook her head. "I can't be certain but we suspected that he was involved with a senior officer."

"A senior officer?" Nora said, clearly having a hard time believing this.

But she nodded. "I don't know who but I have my suspicions."

"Whom did you suspect?"

She looked straight at Clancy, likely because she was off put by the noticeable frown on the security chief's face. "Doctor Wenera. He

spent a lot of time in sickbay and now she's suddenly left the ship in a hurry. I'm thinking it must have been her."

Day Five: Presumed Innocent

- I -

This time it had not required any convincing at all on her part to get Xylion to agree to set out and visit Tela's settlement. In fact, it seemed as if the Vulcan science officer was more eager than the others to learn more about this colony made up entirely of his own people and understandably so.

The day/night cycle on the rogue planet lasted an Earth similar 21 hours and they had agreed with the young Vulcan woman that they'd visit her home first thing in the morning.

Tela was already waiting outside the crashed runabout only minutes after dawn, still wearing the same, simple white dress, and was quick to show the away team the way to her settlement.

"There are no records of any Vulcan colonies either inside this nebula or in close proximity," said Xylion as he walked at her side across the arid terrain. "How exactly did you and your people arrive at this place?"

"I was born here," she said. "Father should be able to explain better than I how this became our home before my birth."

"Fascinating."

"And how did their ship survive in the nebula long enough to get this far inside?" said Deen.

Tela considered her for a moment. "I believe father would be able to explain this better than I."

Deen nodded and afforded the young woman with a smile.

"Maybe they didn't," said the Andorian who more so than anyone else was struggling with the dry heat on this world which was already intense just minutes after first light and had made her strip out of her uniform jacket. "I mean maybe they got off course somehow and crashed on this planet like we did."

"This world is almost half a light-year inside the nebula, I find it hard to believe they could have survived this long," said Leva. "They

must have had some sort of technology to protect them from the radiation.”

“My father would be—”

“Able to better explain it. Of course,” the Romulan officer said.

“So perhaps we wait to ask the questions until we get to the settlement,” said Deen, “and take in the scenery until we get there,” she added with a little smirk. The arid, steppe-like surface didn’t exactly offer a great many highlights. This changed somewhat the closer they got to their destination when she found scarce evidence of flora and fauna.

The first settlers they encountered were working on small fields in the outskirts of the settlement, tending to their crops. The Vulcans turned towards the newcomers when they spotted them but after just a few seconds their curiosity appeared to be satisfied and they returned to their work.

“Not exactly the warmest of welcomes,” said Leva.

“They’re Vulcans,” said Deen. “What did you expect? Shouts of joy and hugs?”

Leva smirked.

The settlement proper was made out of somewhere between twenty to thirty buildings, most of which constructed out of wood and other local materials. The larger buildings towards the center had clearly been converted from hull fragments of a transport ship.

There were about two-dozen Vulcans carrying out daily task all around the settlement. Everyone seemed to have a very specific purpose and nobody appeared to be wasting time with idle chitchat or taking time to rest. It was very much a model of efficiency just like one would come to expect from a Vulcan settlement.

And just like in the fields, no one here seemed to afford the stranded away team with more than a moment’s worth of consideration and to Leva’s disappointment, there was no welcoming committee awaiting them.

Tela led them right to the center of the settlement and close to the largest building which seemed to have been converted from the hull of an old-fashioned freighter and was reinforced in places by wooden constructs and sheet metal which all looked professionally applied and functionally designed if not particularly ecstatically pleasing.

There they actually did find somebody waiting for them. The tall, gray-haired Vulcan man wore long, spotless ember robes and watched the away team patiently, with his hands clasped behind his back, as they were led to him by the young woman.

"May I introduce Elder Volik, my father," she said when they had reached the man. "Father, these are the people I spoke of. DeMara Deen, Srena, So'Dan Leva and Xylion. Xylion is a Vulcan."

Volik considered the newcomers carefully but appeared most intrigued by the science officer. "Indeed," he said. "Welcome to our humble settlement."

Xylion raised his hand in the traditional Vulcan gesture and found that it took Volik a moment to respond in kind. "We are honored that you have received us as your guests."

"Kind of wish it was under different circumstances," said Srena quietly.

But Volik appeared to have overheard her comment. "I understand that your vessel landed on this world unintentionally. That of course is regretful however this happenstance may perhaps be to our mutual benefit."

"Do I take it your vessel crashed here as well?" Deen said.

Volik turned to look at her. "That is correct. Twenty-one standard years ago."

"And may I inquire what brought you inside the nebula?" Xylion asked. "You must have known of the radiation's effects on biological tissue."

"Our vessel was headed to colonize a new world in the Brydon Expanse when a navigational fault caused us to enter the nebula and we came across this world. Our ship was unable to maintain orbit and we were forced to land here."

"You didn't try to leave this place?" asked Deen.

"We attempted initially, however we found our vessel too severely damaged to overcome this planet's gravity field. When we found that this world offered everything we needed to survive, we decided to make this our new home."

"Well," said Leva, looking around. "I like what you've done with the place. A little remote for my taste but then again I suppose you can't have it all."

The attempt of a joke, of course, was for nothing, Tela and Volik simply considered the half-Romulan with blank stares.

Then Volik turned to the Vulcan Starfleet officer. "We are currently making preparations for a meal so that you may meet every member of the settlement. In the meantime perhaps you would appreciate if my daughter showed you what we have been able to achieve here."

Xylion looked at the young woman. "That would be satisfactory."

Neither Deen nor Leva seemed to miss the focus in Tela's eyes when she glanced at Xylion. They exchanged quick glances before Deen turned to the science officer. "Perhaps you should go ahead with the tour, Commander. The rest of us can go exploring on our own. I for one am really interested to learn more about what kind of crops are being grown here."

"Yes," said Leva. "And I think I saw a hunting party earlier. I'd love to see what game you have on this world."

Both Deen and Leva turned to look at the Andorian who didn't seem to understand right away. Then it clicked. "Right ... uh, are those the remains of an *Antares*-class transport?" said the ensign, pointing at the building before them. "Maybe I can have a closer look at that."

"You are free to explore on your own," Volik said. "I suggest we return here by dusk at which time the preparations for the meal should be complete."

With that Volik turned to leave. Tela didn't waste much time leading Xylion away, leaving behind the three other Starfleet officers.

Srena appeared puzzled. "What was that about?"

"You didn't notice the goo-goo eyes she was giving our esteemed colleague?" said Deen with a knowing little grin. "She couldn't wait to get some alone time with him."

"She looked perfectly normal to me."

"Trust me, Ensign," said Leva. "For a Vulcan that was practically a romantic invitation."

"You think he feels the same way?"

Deen shook her head. "Xylion? No way. But that doesn't mean he doesn't deserve a little bit of admiration now and then. I say we let them have their fun and hope that he lets her down easy."

“In the meantime there is plenty for us to see here. And it probably wouldn’t hurt to look out for anything that might help us with repairs to the runabout,” said Leva.

The two women nodded and went their separate ways.

- II -

On Clancy's suggestion they had set up a large, freestanding computer screen in the middle of the security office. The multi-functional transparent screen had been re-purposed to keep track of the ongoing murder investigation and featured on the very top an image of Lieutenant Gedar.

Just below him was an entire row of additional headshots starting with Lieutenant Kolrami, the sour-looking Zakdorn engineer; Corporal Yunta Fey who wore a hard expression on her Bajoran features; Crewman Sierra Decaux, smiling broadly; Charlie Colcord, the attractive, blond engineering advisor to Rosenthal; then the bespectacled professor himself. The last image was that of recently departed and raven-locked Doctor Ashley Wenera.

There was a short description underneath every suspect's photograph including their claimed whereabouts during the time of Gedar's death and possible motives.

Underneath all that was a timeline of events starting at 2315 with Gedar attending and then leaving a late night meeting on deck twenty-four with Hopkins, Rosenthal and Colcord.

2320: Gedar returns to main engineering also on deck twenty-four.

2330: Kolrami leaves main engineering with the remaining engineers, leaving Gedar by himself.

2330-0000: Gedar is killed.

0025: The body is discovered by Crewman Sanzenbacher.

0035: Security arrives and locks down main engineering.

"Raktajino?"

Nora Laas turned away from scrutinizing the board to find Alex Clancy with two cups of steaming hot Klingon coffee, holding out one for her. She took it off him. "How'd you know?"

"I'm an assistant counselor," he said with a little smirk. "It's supposed to be my job to know what people around me are thinking."

She frowned. "Do me a favor, Lieutenant, and do not try to psychoanalyze me."

"You had a *raktajino* when I first came down here to visit you," he said soberly. "It didn't take much psychoanalysis to figure out that it is your beverage of choice in the morning."

She nodded as she took a little sip.

“So, did you have any breakthroughs yet?” he asked and looked back at what some in security had taken to calling the murder board, much to Nora’s displeasure.

She followed his gaze. “Far too many suspects and too much empty space on our timeline. It doesn’t help that we can’t narrow down his time of death either.”

“I believe the remaining duty engineers are due to come in later, they may be able to fill in some of the blanks for us.”

The boatswain whistle interrupted their conversation and everyone in the room stopped what they were doing to await an announcement which followed promptly.

“Attention all hands, this is the captain. It is with great sadness that I have to announce that a fellow crewmember has been killed on board Eagle the day before yesterday. Lieutenant Jinsu Gedar was a valued member of this crew who was well liked by his colleagues and made friends easily wherever he went. Only a day before his gruesome death he delighted us all with his splendid performance in a marvelous play on which he had worked hard over the last few weeks with his fellow performers.

Mister Gedar had served in Starfleet with distinction for nearly five years and had a bright future ahead of him. His death was tragic and entirely unnecessary. He did not die defending his ship, his crewmates or the Federation. Instead, all evidence points towards a willful and cowardly act committed by one of our own.

Rest assured that whoever is responsible for this crime will be found and brought to justice and I have instructed Lieutenant Nora to take whatever actions are necessary to identify and apprehend the perpetrator. I expect every member of this crew to fully cooperate with her and her colleagues while they carry out this investigation.

A memorial service for Lieutenant Gedar will be held tomorrow at 1600 hours in holodeck three. Any who wish to attend may be released from their duty shift to do so.

That is all.”

The security chief uttered a heavy sigh. “And there goes our element of surprise,” she said. “I tried to convince the captain to keep things under wraps for longer but clearly he didn’t agree.”

“We should be thankful we’re on a starship. On any planet or a civilian outpost the media would have been all over this within minutes

of finding the dead body. Besides, as Bensusan pointed out, you can't keep a secret on a starship for long."

"Right," she said. "Thank the Prophets for small miracles then," she said and stepped closer to the board. "But the captain no doubt will want some updates and this," she said and pointed at the large screen, "is not good enough."

Clancy nodded and took a chair. "Alright then, let's go through what we have so far. It may help."

She tapped on the first suspect's image which immediately grew to fill up most of the screen. "There's Sirna Kolrami the Younger."

"Who we know didn't care much for Gedar and obviously couldn't understand why he was in the running for a promotion that he probably felt was suppose to be his. That could be a strong motive."

Nora shook her head. "Maybe on a Klingon ship or perhaps in some twisted parallel universe but not in Starfleet, it's not."

"Let's not forget that not only is he a Zakdorn, he also hails from a family of master tacticians. Which means he probably is more than able to come up with some sort of ingenious scheme to carry out something like this."

"So now we persecute people based on their race?"

"I'm just putting it all out there, Lieutenant," said Clancy and then placed his boots leisurely onto a nearby desk and leaned back in his chair while sipping on his own *raktajino*.

Nora rolled his eyes. "He's got an alibi," she said. "According to the logs he was checked in working on deflector control during the time of death window."

"Checked in, yes, but without internal sensors there isn't a way to verify that. Besides logs can be altered."

She tapped on the larger-than-life Zakdorn face to return it back into the line-up, clearly done for now considering the Starfleet engineer as a murderer and brought up the hard features of Corporal Yunta next.

"Ah yes," said Clancy, "if Kolrami is the brain, she's got to be the fighter. And she'd be more than capable of killing a man, probably needing nothing more than her bare hands to do it."

"If that's all it takes to be a suspect on this ship, we can add the entire Marines contingent and most of my security team onto the board," she said with a frown.

“Yes but Yunta had an intimate relationship with Gedar. And her responses when we questioned her were more than a little bit suspect.”

“She just learned that a man she only recently had a relationship with had been killed, she was clearly not thinking straight,” said Nora and folded her arms in front of her.

“She’s a Marine, isn’t she?” he said. “Trained to think quickly in a life or death situation? And yet she seemed completely out of it for a while there. And I’m not buying the whole mutual break-up story for a minute. That’s what people say to safe face.”

“Or maybe it’s the truth.”

“Well, she’s got no alibi at all.”

She swiped the screen to bring up Crewman Decaux’s photo next.

“The death of Gedar seemed to come as a real shock to her,” said Nora as she considered that large smile on the young woman’s face.

“Either that or she is a great actress.”

The security chief shot him an annoyed look.

“I think we have an abundance of witnesses who can testify first hand that she is a natural on stage. Besides, again, no alibi. Not to mention that she suspected her boyfriend to be cheating on her. Now there’s a motive alright.”

Nora brought up the next two images together so that Colcord and Rosenthal were side by side.

“Not much there,” Clancy admitted, “we know they aren’t the biggest fan of Starfleet engineers and Colcord really didn’t care for Gedar being at that late night meeting on the night of the murder but that hardly makes either of them killers.”

But Nora kept scrutinizing the pair.

“Please tell me you’re not being biased because they are civilians?”

“Of course not.”

“They both have alibis. They were with Hopkins in that meeting until well after the time of death.”

“They could have had somebody else do it. Perhaps somebody on their team.”

“Sounds like a bit of stretch to me.”

But Nora turned to her deputy who was standing close by watching their discussion. “José, have you run a background check on all the civilians? Anyone with priors or a criminal record?”

The Latin lieutenant shook his head. "None I could find, sir. We are limited however on how much information we have on civilians as we cannot sync with any external networks while we are inside the nebula."

Nora nodded and then reluctantly moved to the last suspect. "I find it hard to believe Wenera is somehow mixed up in this."

Alex Clancy got onto his feet. "For once I agree," he said and stepped up next to her. "I know for a fact why Doctor Wenera left the ship and it's not because of an illicit affair with our victim."

"Oh?"

"Sorry, doctor-patient confidentiality," he said with a boyish grin. "Or is it doctor-doctor confidentiality in this case?" he added with a confused look on his face.

"Sorry to burst your bubble but you're no doctor," she said and closed Wenera's image.

"My, Lieutenant, is that a sense of humor I detect?" he said. "Could there be a softer core underneath that tough shell of yours?"

She shook her head. "No, just more toughness."

He gave her another smirk as if to say that he didn't completely believe that before he considered the board once more. "According to Decaux's suspicions a senior officer was involved with Gedar. And with Wenera out of the picture, it narrows down our list of suspects."

Nora grasped her coffee cup and took the seat Clancy had recently occupied. "There is no way a senior officer is involved in this."

"We should follow every lead," he said and brought up the first candidate: DeMara Deen.

The Bajoran quickly shook her head. "No way."

"They were both performing in the play which means they must have spent some time together."

"I know DeMara almost as well as I knew my own sister. Regardless of her supposed attractiveness and whatever you want to call her aura —"

"Tenarian Glow, is it?"

"Whatever," she said. "She is not the one to have casual sexual relationships with the likes of Gedar and she's a pacifist. Besides she left *Eagle* well before Gedar was killed."

"Good point," he said and swiped the screen to bring up the next image, this one of the sandy-blond chief engineer.

“Absolutely not.”

“Now wait a second,” he said. “Lieutenant Hopkins actually makes a lot of sense. She was Gedar’s immediate superior officer and she clearly saw something in him as she admitted herself. So much in fact that she brought him along to a meeting with Colcord and Rosenthal even though they had made it clear that they did not care for any Starfleet input on their ideas.”

Nora shook her head. “No.”

“She was also really shook up over his death,” he continued. “She all but started crying when we talked to her.”

“And that makes her a killer?”

“Maybe not but she may have been involved with him,” he said.

Nora leaned forward in the chair. “Louise and I went to the Academy together. When I said I know Dee like a sister, well I know Louise better than a sister. She is not involved here. Move on.”

But Clancy was not willing to do so just yet. “Listen, I know you have friends on this ship and on the senior staff but if we want to catch whoever did this, you will have to free yourself from all preconceptions. As difficult as that may be.”

She looked him square in the eye, her own killer instinct asserting itself for just a moment. “Move on.”

He did. But the next suspect didn’t sit very well with the security chief either. After all it was her own, no-nonsense portrait that looked back at her from the murder board.

Clancy looked at her over his shoulder, once more seeing those smoldering eyes directed at him.

“Move on.”

“Just saying, if those peepers could kill, nobody on this ship’s safe,” he said but then quickly swiped her off the screen.

Nora seemed to like the next suspect much better and she sat up in her chair. “Wouldn’t put it passed her.”

“Wouldn’t put what passed me, Lieutenant?”

Nora and Clancy turned around to see the real life version of the person currently gracing the board standing near the doors.

The counselor quickly tapped the board to minimize the large face of Tazla Star again and return the screen to its previous configuration.

"Wait," the Trill first officer said as she stepped further into the room. "You have *me* down as a suspect?" she said when she saw her face among the others.

"I think the lieutenant meant this in relation to having had a relationship with our victim," Clancy said but then considered his words for a moment. "I don't think that sounds much better."

"No, it does not."

Nora stood as well. "We're simply pursuing every lead, Commander," she said, garnering her a surprised look from Clancy at her adoption of his earlier words. "So maybe you'd like to tell us where you were on the night of Mister Gedar's death?"

The first officer glared back at the security chief but then spoke before it could develop into a staring contest. "On the bridge, on duty," she said. "I was pulling a double shift. I think there are about four or five witnesses who can confirm that if you want to look into that."

"We probably will," Nora said without breaking eye contact.

"Ah, so Commander, what bring you down here?" Clancy asked, clearly in an attempt to mitigate the rising tension in the room her arrival seemed to have caused.

She looked at him and then at the board. "I'm about to brief the captain with an update on your progress."

"I was going to brief him myself shortly," said Nora.

"I'm sure you were," said the first officer without affording the security chief another look. "So these are your suspects so far?"

Clancy nodded. "Yeah. Ignore that last one."

"I will."

"Do you have any insights on the suspects, Commander," he asked, noticed the disapproving look from Nora but chose to ignore it.

"I can't say that I know any of these people particularly well," she said after studying the names and their faces. "Colcord is interesting."

"How so?"

"Well, I hear she made a strong case to Command to be assigned a different ship to carry out this mission. I don't know the details or the reasons but she seemed quite insistent on the point initially. When it became clear that we were the only ones available, she eventually relented."

Clancy nodded and added the new information into a padd. "That is interesting and warrants further investigation, thank you, Commander."

"Glad to be of help," she said. "I'll leave you to it then," she added and then headed back towards the exit without making eye contact with the security chief.

"Commander," Nora said.

She stopped and turned.

"You didn't answer the most pertinent question."

The Trill considered Nora for a brief moment. "I told you I was on the bridge, Lieutenant."

She smirked without humor. "About having a relationship with our victim."

Star took a deep breath but then appeared to change her mind regarding her response before she spoke. "From what I can tell I wasn't Mister Gedar's type," she said and gestured towards the murder board. "It looks like he preferred blondes," the red-haired Trill said and promptly left.

Nora looked back at the screen, studying it closely.

Clancy took a step towards the Bajoran. "So you and Commander Star—"

She held up a hand to stop him in mid-sentence.

"Sometimes it helps to just let out your frustrations and talk about..." he didn't go on when he noticed those killer eyes on him again. He swallowed. "Maybe some other time then."

But Nora was already too focused on her padd and a new lead she was going to follow up on, not paying the counselor any further consideration.

- III -

Tazla Star had made an actual effort to get to Owens before Nora Laas had been able to. It was childish, even she had to admit that, but it was important to her that the captain would get an update about the murder investigation from her instead of from the security chief conducting it. She was of course still of the mind that the investigation should have been delegated to her but she didn't think her motives were purely petty. As far as she was concerned one of her chief functions on this ship was to keep the captain informed about everything happening on *Eagle*, if everyone simply bypassed her entirely, then what exactly was the point of having her around at all?

It was not a question she hadn't asked herself before in the last four months she had been onboard.

It was perhaps slightly more petty when she suggested to the captain once more that she took a more active role in the investigation itself, that Nora could use her help even after she had successfully lobbied for Lieutenant Clancy to be added to her team. But there was another motive for this as well of course. While she hadn't mentioned anything to Owens, she couldn't completely shake the feeling that her own clandestine investigation into a possible spy on board *Eagle* was somehow linked to the incident in engineering.

Owens had predictably shot her down once again. He had let her down easy and diplomatically, which if nothing else had been a nice touch. But in the end, no matter how tactfully he put it, it was obvious that Owens was not yet happy to give her the responsibilities she felt she deserved in her role.

With a heavy sigh, Tazla Star stepped onto the bridge just in time for the shift change from gamma to alpha. Owens had not yet signed off on her suggestion to switch to a four-shift rotation. Yet another clear sign of the lack of faith he had in her abilities.

She found Lif Culsten standing near the conn and apparently cracking jokes with Ensign Aliris who was one of ship's shuttle pilots but sometimes pulled late shifts at the helm.

The mood changed as soon as they noticed her and the jokes stopped. She seemed to have this effect on people.

“Uh, Commander,” Culsten said. “Anything we can help you with?”

The Krellonian helmsman had a tendency to try and go out of his way to assist the other senior officers whenever he could. At first Star had thought this quality to be excessively obsequious but she had since accepted that it was simply part of his character. Try to be everybody’s friend. She had long since learned that things just didn’t work that way.

She considered the silver-haired officer for a moment as well as the attractive, caramel-colored Risian standing next to him, both looking at her expectantly.

“I’m taking this shift,” she said and then headed for the command chair and took the seat. She didn’t miss the looks the two junior officers exchanged with each other. “Is there a problem?”

Culsten took a step towards her. “It’s just that, well, you see I was going to take this shift and Ensign Aliris was to take the conn in my stead.”

She smirked with little amusement, remembering her own days as a young helmsman. If you had joined Starfleet with high ambitions – and everyone knew that every pilot worth his salt wanted to sit in the big chair one day – you did whatever you could to get yourself to that coveted center seat as quickly as possible. That often meant trying to squeeze in command time whenever possible, even when the ship sat idly in a nebula without plans of going anywhere soon. It was still time logged as having been in charge of the ship. And as a pilot even lower on the food chain, you’d always jump at a chance at sitting behind the main controls.

“Sorry,” she said and began to log herself in via the armrest controls. “Not today.” When she looked up, he was still standing there. She aimed him an impatient look. “You are free to stick around and take the helm.”

“We, uh, we kind of made this arrangement with the captain, sir,” he said, clearly uncomfortable at having to bring this up.

Star was feeling her anger rising but did an admirable job at keeping it in check. “That’s too bad, Lieutenant, because I had already decided to take this shift and had you checked in with me first – as you should have done – I would have told you so,” she said, not caring that it was at least a partial lie. But she was determined not to back down to a junior lieutenant. It hadn’t come to that yet, she had decided.

They stared at each other for a moment and Star wondered if he was going to call her bluff and contact the captain. Fortunately for her, Culsten was not quite that bold and then nodded. "Of course, sir. I'll take the helm."

"Good."

He turned around and made eye contact with a clearly disappointed Aliris who had hoped to be able to take the station for the duration of the shift. When Culsten took that seat instead, she turned and headed for the exit.

"Ensign," Star called after her.

The young woman stopped and turned around. "Sir?"

Star stood and took a step towards her. She had noticed that the Risian woman, true to the more sybaritic nature of her people, wore both her uniform jacket and the red shirt underneath unzipped almost halfway down her chest, allowing for a hint of cleavage. This was obviously a violation of the Starfleet dress code and Star had every intention of setting the woman straight.

That was until she remembered Katanga and his own peculiarities regarding the way he wore his uniform.

"Is there something you need me to do, sir?" she said when Star didn't elaborate further.

"Why don't you go and get some rest and I'll make sure you get the conn on the next shift?"

She beamed at that. "Yes, sir, thank you," she said and left the bridge.

Star smirked, wondering if Owens would approve considering that he hadn't been too happy about Katanga's chosen style. It tickled her slightly that he may not have appreciated the liberal dress code starting to take hold on his ship.

She sat back in her chair, pulled out a padd and began to review Lieutenant Hopkins' report on the explosion in the EPS substation the previous day.

Just as she had already insinuated, the report made it clear that there had been no technical or mechanical fault that could have led to the incident which had nearly flooded parts of the ship with toxic nebula radiation. Even though the chief engineer had put in writing that she could not conceive of Kate Smith having been negligent in her

duties or willfully causing the accident, once taking the computer error out of the equation, there really seemed to be no other explanation.

Reviewing Smith's file did not shed any light why Smith may have done what she did. It was clear that she was a competent engineer, making it difficult to believe that she could have made such a critical error by mistake. Her record was exemplary, she was pretty much a model Starfleet officer ever since she had graduated the Academy and came from a long line of officers who had served in the various Starfleet branches.

But it also didn't escape her that as a skilled engineer she would have been able to send out secret subspace messages by making them look like nothing more than background noise, exactly what had started her off on this investigation and her suspicions that *Eagle* had a spy on board.

"Commander, we seem to be ... moving?" said Rachel Milestone from ops.

Star glanced up from her padd and looked at the screen where she found the large frame of the sensor array in mid-construction. Nothing there made it appear as if they were in motion.

"Are you sure?"

The young ensign nodded. "Yes, sir. 12 meters per hour and increasing, heading directly aft."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure, sir, it could be a thruster malfunction."

"Colcord to bridge, would you kindly keep the ship in one place please?" said the voice of the clearly agitated civilian engineer. *"We're trying to do precision work down here which quite frankly is impossible if you move the ship."*

"So noted, Ms. Colcord. We're looking into this now."

"What do you mean, you're looking into it? Just stop the damn ship."

"We're on it, Star out," she said and quickly closed the channel. She walked up closer to the ops station. "Can you shut down the malfunctioning thruster, Ensign?"

"Just did, sir."

"Good, get somebody in engineering to look into what's wrong with it and then reestablish our previous —"

"Sir, another one just came online," she said urgently. "Speed now 44 meters per hour. Wait, three more thrusters are now engaging."

“What in the seven hells is going on?”

“Sir, I don’t think they’re malfunctioning.”

Star shot the younger woman a puzzled look. “What are you saying? Somebody is purposefully activating them?”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Who?”

Milestone focused back on her station. “According to this the commands are coming from...” she stopped herself and then looked to her right. “Lif?”

But Culsten didn’t respond, instead his fingers busily danced over his console, activating panels as they went.

Star turned to the helmsman. “Lieutenant, what are you doing?”

“Sir, all forward RCS packages are now online and pushing as backwards at 500 meters per hour and increasing,” Milestone said.

“Colcord to bridge, you really have to – “

“Yes, I know,” Star barked. “Stand by. Bridge out.” She closed in on the helmsman. “Lieutenant, shut down the thrusters, now.”

But he continued as if she wasn’t even there.

“Mister Culsten, stand down.”

He took no notice.

Fed up, Star reached out for his chair and swiveled it away from his station. Culsten never made eye contact with her, instead he simply swiveled it back and continued his efforts.

He didn’t even stop when she grabbed his shoulder.

“Alright, Mister, you asked for this,” she said pulled back on his shoulder and then delivered a picture perfect right hook to his chin, causing him to flop out of his seat and land on the deck next to his station.

Milestone jumped out of her seat and went to check on the fallen helmsman. She turned him onto his back and checked him over. Then she looked up at the first officer. “He’s out cold.”

Star shook out her bruised knuckles. “It’s like he’s made out of duranium,” she said and then pointed at the helm station. “Shut down the forward thrusters and return us to our original position. Then get Aliris back up here. Looks like she’s getting her chance to man conn after all.”

Milestone nodded and temporarily took the helm.

“Star to sickbay,” she said as she looked down at the unconscious Krellonian still lying on the deck. “We need a medical team on the bridge.”

- IV -

Main engineering was a hive of activity much more so than usual. Starfleet personnel and civilian engineers were coordinating the construction of the sensor array from here and given the limited time they had until the shields would no longer protect them from the nebula's radiation, things had to proceed on a tight schedule.

This was one of the reasons Nora Laas had begrudgingly agreed to carry out follow up interviews with the last people who had seen Lieutenant Gedar right here in their workplace instead of asking them to come up to the security office.

She did her best to stay out of the way of those men and women rushing back and forth doing their jobs and thanks to her mustard-uniform shirt she didn't look much out of place here.

The same could not be said for Alex Clancy.

"So sorry, coming through," he said apologetically after bumping into at least two crewmembers carrying heavy equipment, both aiming the assistant counselor annoyed looks.

Nora smirked. "Very smooth, Counselor."

"Dodging people is not exactly one of my strength, I'm afraid," he said as he joined the security chief in one of the few quiet corners of the engineering room.

"That's right, you have other skills."

He smiled at that. "Is that a compliment? Are you actually coming to appreciate my assistance in this investigation?"

"Jury still out on that," she shot back with a smirk. "What do you have?"

He held her bemused look for a moment before bringing up his padd. "Chief Petty Officer Telrik confirmed that Gedar returned to engineering at 2322 hours from his meeting with Hopkins, Colcord and Professor Rosenthal."

"That's pretty precise."

"What do you expect from a Vulcan? But here is something interesting. Telrik says that he had observed Lieutenant Hopkins spending a lot more time than usual with Gedar recently and they seemed to be having a heated conversation earlier that same day he was

killed. He does not know what it was about. Now Hopkins did not mention any of this when we talked to her."

Nora found their chief engineer talking to some of her people near the warp core. She noticed the security chief making brief eye contact but then quickly turned away again to continue her discussion with her engineers. "He just got kicked out of a meeting with a high profile Federation scientist, I'm sure she had words for him afterwards."

He shook his head. "This was before the meeting. You don't find it suspicious she didn't mention this?"

The Bajoran considered Clancy again. "It probably slipped her mind. She can't be expected to remember every conversation with a subordinate. What else did Telrik say?"

Clancy did not look convinced but considering how sensitive she had turned out to be when he had suspected her friend before, he clearly decided to shelve that particular point for now. "Things get even better," he said and referred back to his padd. "According to Telrik, Kolrami ordered him and McPhee to recalibrate the plasma injectors and they both left him and Gedar alone in engineering at 2327 hours."

Nora nodded. "McPhee confirmed this?"

"You're missing the crucial point," said Clancy. "Kolrami ordered them to leave engineering to carry out these repairs which were not part on the maintenance schedule for that night."

"Alright," she said, "so maybe he felt it was a good time to overhaul those injectors."

Clancy raised his eyebrows. "On the same day they started working on constructing a sensor array which has to be completed within ten days?"

But Nora wasn't paying attention any more. Instead she had found somebody else in the crowd of engineers who had caught her interest. "I don't think Kolrami is on duty right now," she said absent-mindedly. "We'll talk to him tomorrow. There's somebody else here I wish to speak with," she added and already moved off.

"Who is that?" he said but then quickly found whom she was talking about. Nora was heading across the room and right towards Charlie Colcord.

Clancy sighed and followed only to bump right into another engineer. "I'm so sorry."

“Miss Colcord?” Nora said as she approached the woman who somehow managed to hold three padds, two in one hand, one squeezed in under her armpit and still had one hand free to type away at a computer console. “Do you have a minute?”

She responded without turning to see who had approached her. “No, not really.”

“That’s too bad,” said Nora and stepped up to her. “Seeing that I have a few more questions.”

“Lieutenant,” she said when she shot her a brief glance. “Can’t this wait, I’m in a middle of something here?”

“We can talk here and now or you can come to the security office,” she deadpanned. “Your choice.”

Colcord stopped what she was doing and turned to look at the Bajoran. “You do realize what we are trying to do here, don’t you, Lieutenant?”

She nodded. “You’re doing important work for the war effort, whereas I’m just trying to solve a simple murder. I suppose I can see how you would not consider that particularly important.”

“I was not implying —”

She didn’t let her talk. “I do hope that you caught the captain’s announcement earlier. The one about cooperating with the investigation.”

“I did,” she said sharply, getting agitated by the tone and demeanor of the security officer. “And I’m happy to do so to the best of my abilities but I cannot see why this can’t wait until we’re done with our project here.”

“Because we have a murderer running around on this ship who could strike again at any time if we don’t find her first.”

Colcord’s eyes widened. “You know the killer was a woman?”

Clancy, who had joined the two after having managed to navigate his way across the room without inciting a riot, aimed the security chief an astonished look at her deliberate use of the pronoun.

“I’m leaning that way, yes,” Nora said and looked Colcord straight in the eye.

The intense look actually caused her to drop that padd that she had squeezed under her arm. “Now wait just a minute. You can’t be seriously considering that I had anything —”

“Miss Colcord, if we could just have a couple of minutes of your time to clarify a few questions we have, I promise we’ll be out of your hair in no time,” Clancy said, putting on his friendliest smile in an obvious effort to calm the situation.

It worked and she nodded slowly.

“Let’s go over there,” Clancy said and pointed at an area behind the bright pulsing warp core which appeared devoid of heavy traffic.

Colcord began to walk over to the indicated spot while Clancy threw Nora another look. “Very smooth, Lieutenant,” he whispered.

Nora just shrugged her shoulders.

“What do you want to know?” Colcord said as soon as they had gotten out of earshot of most of the people in engineering and its noisy surroundings replaced instead by the low hum of the warp core chamber.

“*Eagle* wasn’t your first choice for this mission, was she?” Nora said.

The engineer looked confused. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Nora looked at her padd. “In fact only two days after you learned that Starfleet Command had assigned *Eagle* to your mission, you made a case to Admiral Throl to make another ship available instead.”

Colcord sighed. “The *Nebula*-class starship design has certain limitations which do not lend themselves to a mission of this particular nature,” she said. “We’ve made it work but it may have been an easier job on another vessel.”

“Right,” said Nora unconvinced. “According to Captain Owens you spoke to Captain Donners about the possibility of staying onboard *Agamemnon* to carry out the mission of constructing the array instead of transferring to *Eagle*, didn’t you?”

She didn’t seem to want to answer that one. “I may have had a conversation with her about it. I really don’t see—”

“Now here is what I find interesting,” said Nora and studied her padd. “The Starship Design Bureau defines the mission objectives for the *Nebula*-class among others to, and I quote, ‘provide a mobile platform for testing and implementation of mission-specific or new technology of any kind.’ Now the *Agamemnon* is an *Akira*-class starship which is sometimes classified as a tactical cruiser and has no such provision listed in its objectives,” she said and looked up again. “So

explain to me how exactly *Agamemnon* would have been the better choice for this mission."

"I ... look," she said, clearly exasperated now. "Everyone knows those objectives are pretty much interchangeable in today's Starfleet."

Nora smiled. "You're probably right and you're the engineer so you must know about these things better than I do. But I find it odd that if these objectives are really interchangeable why you would be so eager to insist that *Eagle* was not the right ship for this mission?"

The questioned left her flustered.

"I don't think it had anything to do with the ship," Nora said. "I think it had something to do with the crew."

"That's nonsense."

The Bajoran checked her padd again. "You didn't tell us that you knew Gedar before coming on board."

"Because I didn't."

Nora looked her right in the eye with a little twinkle as if she had just caught her out in an obvious lie. "Even though you were both in the same Starfleet Academy year?"

"There have to be thousands of cadets in a year, Lieutenant."

"Oh yes," she said and nodded. "And granted back when I was in San Francisco I barely knew a quarter of the people in my year," she admitted. "But I tell you what, if somebody had shared three classes with me, I was sure to have know them by name."

That left her speechless. She turned away to face the warp core, placing both her hands on the bright red railing surrounding the pit. Then, as if she had suddenly remembered how Gedar had been killed, she quickly removed her hands again and took a step backwards. She uttered a heavy sigh. "Okay, so I knew Gedar at the Academy," she finally said without turning. "That was a long time ago."

"And that's why you didn't want to come on *Eagle*?" said Clancy. "You had a history with him, didn't you?"

She had crossed her arms and her eyes were cast downward but she kept her backs to the two investigators. "Yes."

Clancy noticed the beaming and triumphant smile on Nora's face as if to say that she didn't need him or anyone else to help her solve this case. That she was perfectly capable to dig her way to the truth herself.

"That's a detail you probably should have told us about," he said. "You appreciate that this makes you a prime suspect."

She practically whirled around. "I didn't kill him," she said a little too forcefully and then quickly looked over her shoulder to see if anyone had overheard her. "Yes, I was stupid enough to get fooled by his fake charm and honey-dripping words back when I was at the Academy. We broke-up; I left Stafleet and pursued a different career which as you can tell has worked out alright for me. I had no reason to kill him."

"He cheated on you, didn't he?" Nora said.

She took her time to respond but eventually nodded.

"And that must have hurt you quite a bit," said the Bajoran. "Clearly enough to make you reconsider your entire life and leave the Academy for good. I'd say that's a motive."

But she shook her head. "There were other factors which contributed to my decision to leave the Academy. Besides, all that happened years ago. I got over it. Why would I kill him now?"

"Opportunity," Nora said. "You found out he served on *Eagle* and you had no way to avoid coming here. When your attempts to get another vessel failed, you decided to settle an old score."

"And risk everything I've worked for since?" she said and shook her head again. "Listen, I admit I obviously had some bad history with Jin and that I wasn't his biggest fan because of that. I didn't like the way Hopkins put him on this pedestal as her resident genius and showed him off at the meeting. But I wouldn't have killed him and there is no evidence that I did. You want to charge me with being pissed off with a guy who broke my heart seven years ago, go ahead. But you go after me for killing him, you better make sure you've got a hell of a prosecutor to make this case because I promise you it'll get shot down so fast it'll make your head spin," she said, fuming. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm quite busy trying to save the Federation," she added and then walked off.

Nora looked after her. "Oh, I so like her for this."

"Do me a favor," he said. "Next time you want to accuse somebody of murder, let's talk it through first, alright? Maybe that way we won't reveal all our cards straight away."

"What?" she said. "I thought that went really well."

Clancy just shook his head and turned towards the exit.

Leva had not been dishonest when he had claimed that he had been interested in learning more about the settler's hunting habits and in particular their weaponry.

It hadn't been difficult to locate the hunters. While the Vulcans were not particular welcoming or inquisitive themselves, they were more than happy to answer questions or point him in the right direction. Or at least he thought they were more than happy to. In truth he couldn't tell one way or the other. Of course he hadn't come to expect much different from Vulcans.

He couldn't exactly claim extensive knowledge with the pragmatic race. During his time at the Academy and early in his career he had made a point to avoid Vulcan Starfleet officers as much as possible. At first this had been a merely subconscious effort until he had shamefully realized that he was in fact harboring a prejudice likely born from the fact that many people throughout his life had mistaken him for Vulcan due to his similarly shaped ears and his underdeveloped forehead ridges which were common Romulan characteristics. Conflicted with his own heritage already, he had found no solace in being mistaken as a Vulcan which only added to his confusion and anger.

He had long since weaned himself of those feelings and after working closely with Xylion on *Eagle* for a few years, he could safely claim that he had no lingering issues with Vulcans at all.

"We are about to set out on a hunt," said Stadik, a tall and muscular looking Vulcan who Leva had managed to locate among a group of other hunters. "You may join us if you so wish."

"I'd like that."

And so they set out, leaving the settlement behind and headed north where Stadik explained most of the larger animals roamed.

The small hunting party was armed with primitive weapons, mostly simple bows with steel-tipped arrows and spears.

It didn't take them long to locate their first target. To Leva it looked like a slightly larger American bison with thick fur and small, elephant-like tusks growing out of their upper jaws.

“We call it the *veltek*,” Stadik whispered as he and Leva snuck up on the unsuspecting creature. “It is the largest mammal we have found on this continent. We use its fur for winter clothing and the tusk is ideal for tool making.”

Leva watched as the hunting party completely surrounded the beast. Then Stadik stood up suddenly and yelled.

The spooked animal immediately took off into the opposite direction only to run right into the hunter’s ambush, being pierced by spears and arrows which came flying from three concealed locations.

When the *veltek* didn’t go down straight away and instead turned back towards Stadik and Leva in what appeared to be a mad, adrenaline infused rush, Leva reached for his phaser.

But before he could bring it to bear, Stadik was already running towards the creature in what looked to become terribly painful head-on collision with a five-hundred-pound animal.

Instead Stadik skillfully leaped on the injured creature’s back, brought out his long knife and then rapidly stabbed the animal in the neck. The *veltek* hauled in pain, then its legs gave out and it went crashing into the ground where it remained.

By the time Leva caught up with it, Stadik had already demounted the beast and the other hunters were making preparations to skin the animal.

The Romulan felt slightly ashamed when he realized that he found the entire process, including the skinning of the dead creature somewhat disgusting. A life with replicators had apparently sensitized him to ways of preparing real animals.

“A good hunt,” said Stadik, “this will feed a great many of our people tonight.”

Leva considered the hunter with surprise. “Wait a minute, I thought Vulcans were all vegetarian.”

The man grabbed hold of his dagger firmly and plunged it deep into the dead animal, drawing more dark red blood in the process. “We adapt when needed.”

* * *

The mostly arid conditions on the surface had made Deen curious how it was that these settlers were able to grow such varied crops. She had found at least four different types in the various fields surrounding the settlement. A couple of Vulcan staples and one which she had been told was an apple-like fruit which the settlers had discovered on a trip to a nearby mountain-range and had been successful in growing here.

Always the scientist, she took samples of everything she found for later study but for the moment she was more intrigued with the elaborate irrigation system the settlers had constructed to allow them to raise their crops.

The water, she had been told came from underground streams which they had been able to access by burrowing deep into the ground. An aqueduct system was crisscrossing the settlement and delivered fresh water not just to most homes but also to the many outlying fields with a sprinkler system ensuring that irrigation was delivered equally.

"We have identified two additional underground water sources and we hope to have two more wells in operation by next year," said T'Par, a middle-aged woman who seemed to have been a horticulturist on Vulcan once. "Most of our equipment was destroyed when the ship broke up following impact but we were able to create new digging tools by utilizing surviving components."

"Impressive," said Deen as she looked over the expansive field on which dozens of Vulcans were busily laboring, shielding her eyes from the bright sunlight which she knew not to be sunlight. "I understand the water and obviously the soil here appears to be fertile. But how do you account for the sunshine. There's no star within light-years of this planet."

"We have determined that the unique atmosphere of this world amplifies the natural light emanations from the nebula. As the atmospheric density is not universally equal and reflects light in certain places, as the planet rotates on its own axis, it creates a day and night cycle on the surface."

Deen considered that for a moment. "Where does the heat come from?"

She pointed at the nearby mountain ranges. "Vents and volcanoes spread across the mountains allow superheated gasses from the planet's core to escape into the atmosphere and heat this continent."

"That's truly remarkable."

“We were very fortunate to encounter this world.”

“No kidding,” she said. “What are the chances of crash landing on a rogue planet with its own natural ecosystem so similar to a class-M planet?”

“Would you like to taste one of the fruits we grow here?” said T’Par and handed the Tenarian the bluish fruit she had picked from a tree.

“Thanks,” Deen said, took it off her and bit into it, finding it soft, juicy and sweet. “This is very good. I bet the kids love this.”

T’Par considered the Starfleet officer with an empty look.

“You know, the little ones, the children,” she said, trying to clarify and unable to account for T’Par’s odd reaction. Deen turned to find examples only to realize that as far as she could see, neither in the fields nor in the settlement itself, she could find no children at all. And when she thought about it, she could not remember seeing any since she had arrived.

“Allow me to show you another crop we were able to successfully harvest,” said the Vulcan and began to set out to the next field.

* * *

Srena was relieved to be able to escape the stifling heat by slipping into the settlement’s main building which clearly had been build upon the main hull of the freighter which had brought the Vulcans to this world.

They had added and expanded to the structure over the years but its origins were still very much discernable. From the outside she had noticed the large thruster ports as well as the remnants of the engine module. She hoped that she’d be able to locate spare parts which could assist them in carrying out repairs to the runabout and with any luck they’d be able to take off again and rescue not just themselves but also these stranded colonists.

She found the inside refreshingly cool but also surprisingly dark and empty. Considering this appeared to be the largest structure in the settlement, positioned centrally, she had expected the building to see a lot of use. The opposite appeared to be true.

“Hello? Anyone in here?”

She shivered slightly hearing her own echo respond. The building opened up into a large, seemingly mostly empty hall with the ceiling a good ten to fifteen meters high. No doubt this had functioned as the main cargo hold of the freighter once but had apparently now been converted into some sort of meeting hall.

She took a few steps, looking for the light switch. When she couldn't find anything she regretted not bringing a beacon.

Srena walked slowly across the hall and headed towards the aft part of what had once been a starship and where she expected to find the engine room. All she could hear were her own footsteps reverberating across the large room.

She came across a heavy, metal door and pushed it open. She found a corridor beyond it and it was just as dark as the main hall.

"Hello?"

Once again she heard nothing but her own voice.

For a moment she considered turning around and maybe returning with Deen or Leva. Then she decided that she was being silly. There was nothing here to be afraid of. What could be safer than a colony of Vulcans?

She stepped into the corridor with newfound determination. But after just a few steps she heard the loudest bang and nearly jumped out of her skin in shock.

When she turned around she realized that the metal door she had stepped through had shut unexpectedly.

"Well done, Srena, be scared of a closing door. What a fearless Starfleet explorer you are," she mumbled to herself before taking a deep breath and moving on down the dark corridor. "And for Uzaveh's sake, stop talking to yourself."

The only illumination came from dim lightning strips inserted into the floor. The light they gave off was rather insufficient but at least it proved that some sort of power generator was in operation. And where there was power, they may have been other parts they might be able to use.

She continued on slowly until she reached another heavy door. This time she made sure to close it behind her to avoid another heart-attack inducing incident.

"Jackpot," she said when she realized that she had stepped into what was obviously the engineering section. Albeit smaller than the

main hall, this room was cramped with machinery, most noticeably six huge fusion reactors which reached all the way to the ceiling. Only one was humming away slowly, operating at a very low level. There were a few more lights in here but mostly all they did was throw large shadows which made this room look even more ominous than the rest of the building.

"Get a grip," she told herself. "There are no monsters in the dark."

She stepped up to the operational reactor first and began to inspect it. As a pilot she had a basic familiarity regarding power systems and drive components but not enough to fully understand how this particular device operated.

She thought she caught a flicker of light from the corner of her eye and turned around. But the lights appeared to be working fine.

Then she realized that it hadn't been the light to flicker but the shadow. It had moved. "Hello?"

It did so again, this time on the far side of the room.

She began to step backwards. "Is anyone here?"

There, she was certain she had seen something or someone move.

"I'm just here to find some spare parts," she said, her voice sounding very small to her ears now and she had the desperate urge to run away.

Then all was quiet again. For a moment she heard nothing but her breathing and she was absolutely certain there was nobody else there.

"Damn you, imagination," she said but kept her voice low as a whisper just in case.

She turned back around to study the reactor some more and shrieked.

There was a man right in front of her.

"You shouldn't be here."

"Uzaveh be damned," she cried out, absolutely mortified at finding the Vulcan directly in front of her, the dim light casting half his face in shadow. "Are you trying to scare me to death?"

He raised an eyebrow as if he didn't understand.

Srena was mostly angry now. "Why are you skulking around in here like an animal? Why didn't you respond when I called out?"

"I was not aware of your presence until just now."

She considered him closely and wondered about that saying about Vulcans not being able to lie. "Is there anyone else in here with you?"

"No."

"That's odd."

"This is a sensitive area," the Vulcan said. "You should not be here."

"Sorry," she said. "We weren't told that this place is off limits."

"I will show you back outside," he said and headed towards the door leading back to the corridor.

"I was hoping to find any components here which could help us with repairs to our ship."

"You will not find any here," he said after he reached the door and held it open for her.

Srena looked around. "Are you sure? There are a lot of parts in here."

"These are required to maintain power for the settlement."

"You have one generator in operation. What about the others? What about the drive components, the impulse engines, the thruster assembly? You don't need those to maintain power."

"We have previously explored all possible options to utilize any parts and components available to us to facilitate leaving this world and have come to the conclusion that it is not possible."

Srena took a single step towards him and the door he was still holding for her. "Okay, I get that," she said. "But things have changed now. We've got a ship which is a lot more spaceworthy than your stranded freighter here. Surely if we combine our resources we may find a way to get off this rock."

"Unlikely."

She took another step, struggling to keep her temper in check. She was fully aware how stubborn Vulcans could be, in fact her own people had been at war with Vulcan before they had both helped found the Federation but this man was taking the cake as far as his people's obstinacy was concerned. "It would not hurt to try."

"It would be a wasted effort," he said sharply. "Now I must insist that you leave this area."

She stared at the man for a moment longer before realizing that there wasn't really anything else she could do and then trotted out of the room. She heard the door being slammed shut behind her before he sealed it from the inside.

"Thanks for your help."

- VI -

"I still don't understand what we're doing back here. We've already been through his quarters."

Alex Clancy turned to see Nora Laas with her arms crossed under her chest and leaning against the bulkhead of the late Lieutenant Gedar's bedroom. It wasn't difficult to tell that she was still annoyed by his lack of appreciation of the manner in which she had confronted Colcord. She had not taken well to his point that they should have made a strong case against her before accusing her of killing Gedar and that catching her in the blatant lie that she hadn't known Gedar, was not equal to an admission of guilt.

They'd had words since then and as Clancy had quickly learned, you did not want to get into an argument with the fiery security chief.

"I figured that if we want to go after Colcord we need some better evidence," he said and watched her frown at that. "According to witness statements Gedar and Colcord have never been seen together outside of engineering. Now if it were me, and I came back on the ship where my former lover who crossed me serves on, and I considered killing him, I'd probably confront him at least once first."

"Here?" she said and looked around skeptically.

He shrugged. "Where else? She couldn't have risked being seen with him in public and inviting him to her quarters may have seemed suspicious as well. I figure she would have come here."

"And how do you plan on proving this, Detective?" she said with obvious sarcasm in her tone.

That's when the annunciator sounded.

"Ah, just on cue," said Clancy and walked over to the doors to let Elijah Katanga enter the quarters. "Welcome, Doctor. Did you bring it?"

He showed him the tricorder. It didn't look standard-issue and had clearly been modified with a bulkier sensor module. "Naturally."

"And what is that?"

Katanga considered Nora for a moment. "Well, medical tricorders are really great if you are trying to find out what is wrong with people. It gives you all the basic biological and medical readings you might need. But it's usually only showing you what is. Not what was."

The security chief looked perplexed.

Katanga stepped into the room and opened his tricorder to begin scanning the room. "Say I scanned this room with a regular tricorder. I could probably tell you that it belonged to Lieutenant Gedar as I would find numerous recent DNA traces belonging to him. This little fellow can find out who may have been in his quarters by picking up the very faint DNA traces of persons who may have only been here a short while."

"So you're saying you can tell who has been in his quarters recently?"

Katanga shook his head. "Not with absolute certainty, no. It depends on how many hair follicles and skin cells that person left behind while they were here. I've been in the room for only a minute or so, I wouldn't be able to find any traces of my DNA."

Clancy followed the doctor across the room. "I'm thinking that Colcord would have spend some time here, if she came. It may have even become physical."

The African doctor nodded. "That would make it more likely to pick up a trace," he said and then as the two investigators watched with curiosity, the veteran doctor actually went down onto his hands and knees to scan the carpet more closely while slowly crawling across it.

Nora looked on with interest. "Why didn't we use this technique at the murder scene?"

"Dust," Katanga said.

"Beg your pardon?"

"That's what we're looking for. Dead skin cells mixed in with tiny hairs and all kinds of other microscopic remains."

"And?" Nora said.

"And," Katanga said, still on all fours. "Starships and most Federation installations are regularly swept by invisible sterilization beams to eliminate dust build up," he added stopped and looked up at her. "It's how we keep everything so damn clean all the time."

The Bajoran nodded. "Okay, but not here?"

"No," said the Doctor and went back to scanning. "Somebody had the ingenious idea to have the sweeps suspended in this room after Mister Gedar was killed."

"Me," said Clancy and looked at Nora with a grin. "He's talking about me in case you were wondering."

"Congratulations."

He nodded proudly.

"I'm still not following why you didn't do this for main engineering."

"Because of the dust mites," he said.

"Huh?"

"Dermatophagoides farinae," said Katanga from the floor. "Where there's dust those microscopic little buggers show up as well. And you can't have that around sensitive technology."

When Nora was still not quite following, Clancy quickly jumped in to explain further. "It means main engineering gets sterilized much more regularly than other parts of the ship. By the time it occurred to me to suspend the sweeps it was already too late for engineering."

"Wouldn't have worked there anyway," Katanga said as he continued to scan. "The device becomes unreliable in a place where there are too many traces. And engineering is visited by two dozen people each day, there'll be no way to sort through all that. Besides ... ah."

Clancy stepped closer to Katanga. "Doctor, did you find anything?"

"Yes, my intervertebral disc," he said with a little groan and then looked up to see the two investigator with worried expressions on their faces. "Why the hell am I the one crawling around the floor anyway? This is a job for the young and able-bodied," he said and slowly pulled himself back up, Clancy quickly coming to his aid. "Who wants to crawl around on all fours?"

"Don't look at me," said Nora when she noticed Clancy glancing his way. "I outrank you."

She couldn't help but smirk when he nodded and then lowered himself onto the floor after Katanga had thrust the device into the counselor's hand.

After a couple of minutes of crisscrossing the room on his hands and knees, the device uttered an alarm.

"Let me see that?"

Clancy handed it back for the doctor to review.

"Definitely female."

"Can you determine who it belongs to?" Clancy said

Katanga began to manipulate his tricorder. "Cross-referencing with the ship's database now and ... Crewman Decaux, Sierra," he said triumphantly.

"There's a surprise," said Nora, sounding unimpressed. "She was his girlfriend so obviously we'd find traces of her DNA in his quarters."

"Well, there is plenty of room left for you to scan," he said and gave the device back to Alex Clancy who dutifully went back to crawling and scanning every square inch of the quarters from the bedroom, the wash room and finally returning to the main living area.

Just before they were about to give up, the device piped up once more.

"I think we hit the jackpot, boys and girls," Katanga said once he had been handed back the device. "Another trace, very faint, no wonder we didn't pick it up before. According to the database this one does not belong to a Starfleet crewmember at all."

That got the Bajoran's attention. "It's Colcord," she said and smirked as if she had been vindicated and then looked at Clancy who was standing up again. "Now let's see how she'll explain that away."

"I hate to be reason for disappointment," said Katanga, "but these are definitely male DNA traces."

"What?" Nora said. "Are you sure?"

Katanga shot her a stern look. "My dear girl, I believe I've been doing this long enough to be able to distinguish between a Y and an X chromosome."

"Who is it?" Clancy asked.

The doctor referred back to his tricorder. "According to this, the DNA trace belongs to one Professor Erez Rosenthal."

Nora and Clancy exchanged befuddled looks.

- VII -

"I was born two months after we were marooned on this world," Tela said as she led Xylion up a mountain close to her settlement. "I have never known any place but this one. I have read much about the home world and I have seen pictures and sometimes I have imagined what it would be like to see it with my own eyes."

"Vulcan is not too dissimilar in climate and terrain as this world," he said, following her up a steep ravine with little effort. A human may have struggled climbing the mountain but Xylion was used to the heat and the thin air. He had taken many similar expeditions, crossing the Vulcan's Forge in his younger days. And the young Tela was clearly not unaccustomed to climbing this mountain, the way in which she enthusiastically led the way.

"Perhaps than I am not missing much," she said and turned around, considering the Starfleet officer for a moment as he caught up to her.

"Vulcan may be similar to this world, but they are not comparable."

"How about you? Do you miss it?"

He raised an eyebrow at the seemingly odd question. "It is my home. I tend to be most comfortable there."

She nodded and then set out again.

"I have never before heard of the name of the vessel that crashed on this world, nor was I aware of any Vulcan colonial projects in this sector of space," he said, following her once more.

"I do not believe our mission was sanctioned by High Command. There may not have been official records of our colonization efforts."

"That would explain why no rescue mission was ever attempted."

"It would have been difficult to reach us within this nebula in any case," she said. "How were you able to penetrate it so deeply?"

"We utilized advanced transphasic shield technology which protect our vessel from the harmful thermionic radiation prevalent in the nebula."

It was already the late afternoon by the time they finally reached the plateau at the top of the mountain and Xylion realized why she had brought them to this place. From their vantage point they had an

unobstructed view of the full extent of the settlement below, including its many outlying fields, the vast steppe to the north and he could even spot the canyon in which the *Nebuchadrezzar* had crash landed.

"I enjoy coming here from time to time," she said and stepped fairly close to the edge of the plateau which terminated suddenly and into an almost vertical cliff which plunged downwards a good fifteen hundred feet or so.

"I can understand why," he said as he took in the view.

She turned to him. "Is Vulcan as magnificent as this?"

"Beauty is a subjective standard."

Her lips curled up slightly, coming dangerously close to a smile. "Do our people not appreciate beauty then?"

"On the contrary," he said. "Vulcans are more than able to appreciate esthetically pleasing qualities."

She took another step towards him. "Do you think I am ecstatically pleasing, Xylion?"

He couldn't stop his eyebrow from shooting up again.

Tela quickly turned away as if embarrassed. "I ask your forgiveness for the inappropriate nature of my question."

"None are necessary. I understand that living so far removed from our people has been a great challenge for yourself as well as the other colonists here. It requires great mental discipline to survive in such an environment."

"I suppose we are not quite like the Vulcans you are used to," she said but keeping her eyes on the vista below.

"I have met many different kinds of Vulcans, including those who did not live their life according to the same principles that most of us follow. I was once betrothed to a woman who was inspired by the teachings of *v'tosh ka'tur*. I am not disturbed by this. In fact I find myself fascinated by alternative Vulcan lifestyles."

She turned to face him once more, her eyes wide open in curiosity. "What happened to your betrothed?"

"She was killed."

Tela couldn't quite hide the frown crossing her face. "I am very sorry to hear that."

"While her death was without purpose I continue to treasure the memories I shared with her."

"And there is no other woman in your life now?"

"No," he said simply.

She nodded slowly before she turned her back on him again.

Xylion stepped up next to her, being mindful of the dangerously steep precipice just a few feet away, and joined her in overlooking the settlement and the lands beyond.

For a moment neither of them spoke as they stood side by side, quietly taking in the seemingly endless view.

"When was the last time you visited Vulcan?" she finally asked.

"Four years, two months and twenty-three days."

She shot him a sidelong look. "That is a long time."

"My duties on *Eagle* have not allowed me to return to Vulcan. Since the war with the Dominion has broken out I have found myself with even fewer opportunities to return home."

"*Eagle*," she said. "Your starship."

"That is correct."

"It has become your new home. Perhaps like this place has become mine."

He considered her for a moment. "A crude analogy but not entirely incorrect."

Tela diverted her eyes back to the settlement below and for a moment didn't speak almost as if she was considering her next words very carefully. Or perhaps she was trying to find the courage to speak them. "Xylion," she began. "Could you ever imagine a place like this becoming a home to you?"

* * *

The temperature had plummeted after dark and Deen marveled how well this orphaned planet simulated the dark/night cycle which clearly warranted further research. At this point she was convinced that the cycle, supposedly created by the way in which the atmosphere reflected the light of the nebula was somehow connected to the geothermal gasses which were released at a much slower rate during the night cycle, causing the noticeable drop in temperature.

The cooler climate was manageable mostly thanks to the huge bonfire the Vulcans had set up close to the center of their settlement and

the many smaller fires all around it. True to his word, Volik and his people had prepared a lavish feast to welcome the Starfleet away team and the settlement was like transformed from the way it had looked after their arrival in the morning.

Tables had been set up all around the central bonfire which now held all manner of foods and drink which the settlers had worked all day to prepare. There were wooden tables and chairs set up by the smaller fires as well which were now occupied with those Vulcans who were not busy with last minute preparation.

Deen and her colleagues sat at one of those tables.

"You wanted a welcome party?" said Deen and aimed a smirk at the half-Romulan tactical officer sitting by her side.

"I have to say, I'm impressed," he said as he considered the many foods on the tables, much of it he had observed being hunted down and skinned himself earlier. "I didn't think Vulcans knew how to put together a party. I was also under the impression that they were vegetarians."

"Indeed," said Xylion but didn't add anything further.

"Well, I know I am," said Deen. "Fortunately they have plenty of fruits and vegetables they managed to cultivate so I doubt I'll starve. But don't you think there is something else odd here?" She continued when Leva and Srena aimed puzzled looks at her. "Who is missing from this picture?"

The Andorian seemed to realize it first. "Children?"

Deen nodded. "I think the youngest person I've seen in this settlement is Tela and she must be in her early twenties."

"She was born shortly after they arrived on this world," Xylion said.

"And Vulcans mate at least every seven years, right?" said Deen. "Even if there were no children on the transport you would think they had produced some offspring by now."

"Maybe they just haven't been in the mood," said Leva with a smirk.

"That's one hell of a dry spell, even for Vulcans," the Andorian said.

"Considering my people's longevity, it is possible that they decided not to create offspring due to the difficulty of raising children in this environment."

"I'm not sure how serious they are about getting out of here," said Srena. "They were not particularly fond of the idea of letting me scavenge for parts to repair the runabout. In fact that's putting it mildly, I was pretty much thrown out of their engine room."

Deen considered the Andorina curiously but didn't get much of a chance to pursue this further when a whole throng of Vulcans brought them plates filled with food. "You don't have to serve us," she told them. "We'd be glad to come and get our own."

"You are our guests and more," said Tela who led the procession. "And I hope you enjoy the foods we have prepared for you."

She nodded thankfully and didn't miss the tiniest hint of a smile she reserved for Xylion before she quickly departed again to take her seat at a nearby table and next to her father.

Shortly thereafter every Vulcan was seated and an eerie quiet befell the settlement with only the cracking of the fires to be heard.

Then the elder Vulcan rose from his chair to address the newcomers and his people alike. "We have gathered here tonight to welcome these intrepid men and women who have travelled from afar to find us here in the most remote place in the galaxy. And for us this visit is a most joyful occasion," he said but kept the tone of his voice so neutral, one would have been hard-pressed to detect any such sentiments within it. "It has been a long time since we have seen faces which were not our own. It has been a long time since we were able to grow our community."

Srena gave the others a befuddled look. "What does that mean?" she whispered.

"We have waited a long time for this opportunity," Volik continued, "and our patience is finally rewarded as I always knew it would be. Today not only are we welcoming these strangers as friends in our midst, we are welcoming four new and healthy members to join our settlement. And what better way to commemorate such a significant event then by celebrating the forthcoming betrothal of my daughter Tela to Xylion son of Xenek."

Silence followed once more but this time mostly due to the stunned reactions of the away team.

"Say what now?" said Leva after a few moments.

Xylion's face however betrayed no emotion other than a single eyebrow climbing his brow.

Day Six: Military Justice

- I -

Charlie Colcord entered the security office like a woman possessed. "Where is he? Tell me now."

José Carlos spotted the engineer and quickly moved to intercept her. "Ma'am, I need you to calm down."

She considered the Hispanic officer with a scowl. "Don't you tell me to calm down," she said. "This is absolutely outrageous. Your boss is obsessed with coming after me and now she thinks the best way to get to me is by having the professor arrested. On absolutely no grounds whatsoever. I will not stand for this. I will lodge a formal complaint at the highest levels of the Federation Council over this."

Carlos shook his head. "Professor Rosenthal is not under arrest. We've merely brought him in for —"

But Colcord had already spotted the room in which the professor was being kept and apparently being interrogated by Nora Laas and Alex Clancy. She quickly sidestepped the burly security officer and headed straight for those doors.

"Ma'am, you can't go in there," he protested but was too slow to stop her.

"Never mind telling me what I can't do," she said and slipped into the room, immediately causing all three occupants to rise from their chairs at the surprising disruption. "This is an outrage," she said. "You can't do this and I'll make sure the captain learns that you are dragging the professor in here just to get to me, Lieutenant."

"Charlie," Rosenthal began but didn't get a chance to continue when Nora cut in.

"You won't have an opportunity to complain to the captain when I have you locked up for impeding a murder investigation," the security chief said sharply as she stepped right up into the engineer's personal space.

Colcord, recognizing the hard eyes and body posture of a born fighter, took half a step back. But she refused to back down entirely. "You are way out of line here, Lieutenant," she said. "And to make

matters worse your mistakes will have far-reaching consequences. While you grasp at straws you are endangering a mission vital to the war effort. Millions of people could die because of what you are doing here.”

“Oh please, spare me your self-righteous blabber.”

Colcord grew noticeably red in the face.

Clancy quickly positioned himself between the two fuming women. “Ladies, perhaps we all need to take a little breath and calm down before we say something that we can’t take back.”

Both Colcord and Nora immediately redirected their fury at the assistant counselor.

“Charlie,” Rosenthal said again, this time getting the woman’s attention. “It’s alright, really. I have not been put under arrest as far as I know, isn’t that right?” he said and looked at Clancy who for the moment appeared to be the much more coolheaded investigator in the room.

The counselor nodded. “That’s right.”

“They’ve just asked me to come in and answer a few questions and I was happy to help. It’s really quite harmless,” he said, looking at his colleague again. “They’re just doing their job and I’m sure this won’t take all that long.”

Colcord considered her boss for a moment and noticeably calmed herself. Then she nodded. “Very well, Professor but be careful, I don’t trust this one at all,” she said and shot venom at the Bajoran.

“Well that’s mutual,” Nora said with a humorless grin.

“Uh ... Mister Carlos, why don’t you escort Miss Colcord to a place she can wait until we’re finished here.”

“I’ll go back to engineering,” the woman seethed instead. “And I damn well know the way,” she added when Carlos tried to point her into the right direction. She was gone as quickly as she had appeared, leaving the two investigators and Rosenthal alone in the room once more.

“Please forgive my eager colleague. I know she’s a bit of a firebrand but that kind of dedication is exactly the reason why we’ve been able to make this sensor array work like we did,” he said as he took his seat again.

"Yeah well, that kind of temperament can get somebody in trouble quite easily," said Nora, still looking after the civilian engineer as she stormed out of the security office.

But Rosenthal resolutely shook his head. "I know what you're trying to imply, Lieutenant but let me dispel any such notions straight away. Charlie is not a killer."

Clancy sat back in the chair at the table opposite the engineer. "Were you aware that she had a history with the victim? That they had attended the Academy together and had a bad breakup there?"

The professor took off his glasses to polish them with a cloth. "Not until recently, no."

Nora had needed a minute herself to calm down after her encounter with Colcord. She took the seat next to Clancy. "I believe you were just about to tell us why you went to see Gedar the day before he was killed."

The professor placed the spectacles back onto his nose. "The lieutenant had made some interesting observations about my shield design that I wished to discuss with him further."

"In his quarters?" said Nora skeptically.

"It seemed like as good a place as any."

"I'm sorry, Professor but I'm not buying it," she said.

"Look," he said and took a breath of air before continuing. "Both Charlie and I had made it quite clear that we were not interested in any input on our project. We both understood the tendency of Starfleet engineers to try and overanalyze everything which I'm sure under normal circumstances is perfectly fine and probably even appropriate. But we were mindful that on our tight schedule we didn't have the time for this kind of approach by people who were not familiar with the extensive work we'd already put into this."

"So you were concerned about meeting with Gedar in public after you had made your views on this known?" said Clancy.

He nodded. "It would have sent the wrong message."

"What exactly did you discuss with him?" Nora wanted to know.

"No offense, Lieutenant, but I doubt I would be able to fully make you understand the particularities of our conversation."

Nora frowned but Clancy jumped in before she could fire back. "Colcord mentioned earlier that Lieutenant Hopkins had a rather high opinion of Gedar. Did you share that view?"

“Oh absolutely,” he said. “There was no doubt in my mind that he was a very gifted young man, I wouldn’t have sought him out otherwise.”

Nora crossed her arms below her chest and leaned back in her chair. “So you’re telling me that after the years you’ve worked on these shield designs of yours and after you made it clear that no one on this ship would be able to wrap their heads around this in just a few days, you come across Gedar who had such a great insight on your work that you just had to speak to him about it in private?”

Rosenthal considered her for moment, peering at the Bajoran through his eyeglasses. “Yes, essentially, I suppose that is exactly what I’m saying.”

She looked less then convinced.

“You can see of course how all this sounds rather implausible,” said Clancy.

He nodded understandingly. “It sounded implausible to me as well,” he admitted. “That’s why I was quite eager to speak to the young man. And I have to say he was quite happy to share his theories with me, some of which, to my surprise were very similar to my own.”

The doors to the room opened once more, this time to let Carlos enter who, judging by his expression, was at least a little bit uncomfortable at having to disrupt the security chief again. “Apologies for the interruption, sir, but we have a situation in the Nest,” he said, referring to *Eagle’s* main crew lounge.

“What kind of situation?” she said and was already on her feet.

“It appears to be some sort of altercation and involves two of our suspects,” he said.

“Have a security team meet me there,” said Nora but was already halfway out of the door.

After exchanging a look with the deputy, Clancy got out of his chair and rushed after her but already knew that he had very little chance of keeping up with the security chief.

* * *

Nora Laas had been so eager to get to the Nest and hopefully catch a significant break in the murder case, only halfway there did she realize that she hadn't brought a weapon. Confident in her abilities to subdue a suspect or two without a phaser she wasn't all that concerned. The captain had already given the order, on her recommendation, that while the investigation was ongoing, only security personnel were allowed to wear sidearms while all other weapons would be locked away until required or once the killer had been apprehended. The last thing anyone wanted was for an armed murderer to roam the ship.

She could hear the noise even before she had stepped into the crew lounge located at the forward part of deck ten.

"You killed him, you bitch."

She recognized that voice.

"You were always jealous that he left you for me. You couldn't take it, could you? But you were never right for him. Never."

It belonged to Sierra Decaux and her ire was directed at Corporal Yunta Fey who was being held back, barely, by a couple of off-duty security crewmen. Her face was dripping wet while Decaux still held on to an empty glass.

Nora didn't need to be a trained detective to understand what had happened here.

"Why don't you come closer and say that again to my face?"

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Maybe you should be."

Nora approached the scene with quick strides. "Okay, people, let's break this up, now."

"What are you going to do?" said Decaux, her anger still directed at the Marine. "You going to kill me? Are you and Kolrami going to put together another cowardly scheme to get rid of me, too?"

Yunta freed herself from the man trying to hold her back, slipping out of his grasp and then rushed a wide-eyed Decaux who didn't react nearly quickly enough to avoid being tackled by the other woman.

They both went crashing down onto a table before they fell onto the floor with Yunta on top of the clearly overpowered crewman. The Marine didn't waste much time, drew back her arm and delivered a powerful blow against Decaux's head, causing it to jerk violently with blood and spittle flying free.

Nora was on the Yunta within seconds. "Stand down, Corporal."

But Yunta wasn't listening, instead she seemed lost in her fury.

The security chief grabbed the woman by her shoulder before she could land another blow and pulled her back forcefully, getting her off Decaux.

"Stand down," she said again. "Now!"

But instead of heeding the warning, the Marine launched herself at Nora, going in low and taking out her legs to force the surprised lieutenant onto the floor, bracing herself at the last second to avoid a painful landing. "Oh no you didn't," she said as she slowly stood again, her eyes narrowing at the fellow Bajoran who had attacked her.

"Stay out of this," Yunta hissed. "This is between me and Decaux."

"I warned you," said Nora as she stepped closer. "But you didn't want to listen."

Yunta apparently decided a preemptive strike was in order and Nora was too late to recognize the martial art move designed to incapacitate her. The strike came from her left and she was not quite fast enough to weave to her right to fully dodge it. She mentally berated herself even before Yunta managed to land the hit. She had been a Marine once. She knew exactly what tactic the corporal had employed but she had simply been too slow to defend against it.

The blow against her head was powerful enough to causer her to stumble back to the floor and for a moment she couldn't quite get the room to stop spinning.

Then she noticed that Alex Clancy and a handful of security officers had entered the Nest, just in time to see her go down like a first year cadet. Besides the pulsating pain in her skull, she now felt the much more painful sting of embarrassment.

"Nora," Clancy cried out and was already heading her way with Carlos and the security team right behind him.

"Stay ... stay back," she said and waved them off, determined to finish Yunta on her own, security protocols be damned. The younger woman had managed to strike her twice already and she was going to make sure that there wouldn't be a third. Yunta Fey had started this fight, ignoring her warnings. Nora Laas was determined to end it. And she would not allow herself to underestimate her opponent again.

"I told you to stay out of it," said Yunta, breathing hard and clearly worked up and filled to the brim with adrenaline, she was approaching the downed security chief again.

"See, that's just something I cannot do," she said and waited until Yunta was just a couple of feet away. Then she took a deep breath and leashed out, swiping her leg in a wide arch and cutting away Yunta's own legs from underneath her.

She went crashing down to the floor.

Nora was not done. She bounced back up like a wound-up spring, gripped Yunta Fey by the throat and pulled her up quickly only to push her hard into a nearby column, the force of the impact causing the woman to groan.

"You shouldn't have made me angry," Nora said and then before she had a chance to catch her breath, she pulled her away again and then brought the stunned woman down hard onto a table with such force that the glass surface cracked under the impact.

Yunta was dazed but that didn't stop Nora to pull her up once more, even if the Marine was barely able to stand on her own two feet, and then deliver a right hook which send her flying over a chair and land sprawled out on the floor.

The security chief's hard eyes made it obvious that she still wasn't done and she took a step towards the prone figure.

"I think she's had about enough," said Clancy and placed a hand gently on Nora's shoulder.

This hadn't been a wise move as it caused the security chief to whirl around with her elbow cocked and ready for another blow.

"Whoa, whoa, same side, same side," Clancy cried out and held up his hands in surrender.

Nora relaxed. "Don't sneak up on me."

"Noted."

Yunta in the meantime was pulling herself back up slowly by holding on to the back of a chair but before she could even think of trying another move, she was surrounded by armed security personnel.

Nora stepped up to her as well, looking down at the other Bajoran for a moment. "Brig. Now," she said.

José Carlos and the rest of the squad quickly grabbed the woman who put up far too little resistance at this point to stop them and then was dragged out of the room.

“Are you alright? You’re bleeding,” said Clancy after having stepped up to her again.

Nora reached out for her face and above her right eye where she could feel a bruise. Her fingers came away with blood. “I’ll be alright,” she said.

But Clancy had already found a few napkins and passed them to her. “Are you sure? I think maybe you should stop by sickbay.”

She took the napkins and wiped away the blood. “Only thing hurt is my pride.”

Clancy smirked. “I don’t know, I thought you had things under control. Maybe a little bit too much so.”

She aimed him a hard stare and he quickly turned away. He didn’t notice her tiny smile. She hadn’t forgotten how concerned he had sounded when Yunta had surprised her.

The counselor had found Decaux who had been helped back onto a chair by some of the patrons. She had a noticeably black eye and a bleeding lip. “Now you need to go to sickbay, young lady. No arguments.”

Decaux was back on her feet in an instant. “Sickbay?” she said, sounding terrified. “No, no, I’m fine, really,” she said quickly and before Clancy could insist any further, she was already hurrying towards the exit.

“Crewman,” he called after her but it was too late, she was gone.

Clancy turned back to Nora. “I seem to have the worst effect on women lately.”

She offered a little smirk before her face turned serious again. “Let’s see how you do with murderers. We’ve got one in the brig waiting to be questioned.”

- II -

"I don't get it, Lieutenant," said Tazla Star as she looked over the padd she held before she glanced up to look the Krellonian helmsman in eye. "You have a mostly spotless record, a few high honors including the Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry. You're at the most twelve month away from getting a promotion to full lieutenant and after that, your career options are wide open. What would make you do what you did? Why turn on your own people like that?"

Culsten was clearly frustrated, the deep frown on his face a clear indication. "But I didn't."

"You willfully steered this vessel away from the construction site, disobeyed all orders and refused to stand down," said the first officer, keeping her voice firm as steel.

The young man looked over to Elijah Katanga who was standing to the side in the XO's office to find an answer in his sympathetic eyes which apparently, however, he was unable to provide. He glanced back at the first officer. "I ... I didn't do any of that."

"Then explain my bruised knuckles."

He tenderly touched his jaw. "I wish I could. That hit is about the only thing I do remember. Or at least the resulting pain."

"The doctor ran a thorough scan and he could find no signs of memory loss, Lieutenant," Star said sternly. "You now what that leads me to believe? That you knew exactly what you were doing."

He shook his head. "No, I ... Commander, I can't explain what happened, I wish I could. But there is no way I would have endangered this ship and crew on purpose."

"I want to believe you but the evidence says otherwise," she said and shot a quick glance at the armed security guard standing by the door. "For the time being you're relieved of duty and confined to quarters."

The security guard stepped up and Culsten got onto his feet, a pleading look in his eyes. When it was obvious that the XO was not going to change her mind, his shoulder slumped and he was escorted out of the office.

"I don't know," said Katanga once they were alone. "He does not strike me as an enemy spy."

Star leaned back in her chair. "We know very little about the Krellonians. A very secretive race. And let's not forget that our murder victim hailed from the same species and was a friend of his."

"You make it sound like there is some sort of conspiracy going on."

"It would be a plausible explanation."

"But you have no evidence, other than an unsolved murder and a couple of officers behaving erratically. Something else could be at work here," said the doctor.

Star stood. "You performed scans on both Culsten and Smith and you found no medical explanation for their behavior."

But Katanga shook his head. "Taz, I've been around for a long time and I've seen a lot of things that cannot be explained by known science. Just because I haven't found anything, doesn't mean there isn't something there."

"Fair enough. But what do you expect me to do? I can't simply attribute everything that's happened to some unexplained phenomenon. Right now my theory is the only one that makes the most sense and I'll pursue it until I have reason to do otherwise."

The door to her office opened, startling Star for a moment. She was just about to snap at whoever had dared to waltz into her office unannounced when she realized that it had been the only person on board she did not outrank. She instinctively straightened her shoulders and reestablished her composure. "Sir?"

"Commander, where is Lieutenant Culsten?" Owens said with little preamble.

"We just finished interrogating him and I've restricted him to quarters."

He didn't appear particularly happy with that explanation. He glanced at the doctor next, ignoring for the moment the fact that he was still refusing to wear his uniform jacket. "Did you find anything that could explain his behavior?"

"I'm afraid not," he said. "All his scans came back normal. No signs of memory loss or alteration. No changes at all to his biochemistry or brain patterns as far as I can tell. We're still analyzing and comparing with the scans we took of Lieutenant Smith to see if something shows up."

"I cannot believe that Culsten would just snap like this. He's always been an extremely reliable officer," said the captain and then glanced at Star. "Commander, what the hell is happening on my ship?"

Star considered the question for a moment as if she was not sure how exactly to respond. She made eye contact with Katanga but it didn't take a mind reader to tell what he was thinking.

Owens didn't miss the telling look and focused on his first officer. "If there is something you'd like to tell me, Commander, now would be a good time."

The Trill hesitated for a moment. She suppressed a sigh and then looked straight at her commanding officer. "I believe we may have a spy on board, sir."

The captain looked understandingly surprised. "A spy? Explain."

Star couldn't hide her discomfort at having to reveal her theory even though she still had no tangible evidence to support it. "A couple of weeks ago I came across a few irregular readings which led me to believe that somebody was sending out encrypted and unauthorized transmissions. However whoever was behind it knew exactly what they were doing. It was virtually impossible to distinguish the transmission from background radiation and most traces that could shed any light on this were deleted before I could make any records. Next thing we know, we have a dead body, an engineer trying to blow out the shields and a helmsman attempting to hijack the ship."

Owens' face spoke volumes, surprise and skepticism battling for dominance.

"What's more," she continued. "All three persons are connected. Katherine Smith worked closely with Jin Gedar in engineering and Lif Culsten was not only a fellow Krellonian, he was also a close friend of Gedar's."

It took a moment for all that to sink in. When it finally did, Owens glanced at Katanga. "Doctor, would you mind giving us a minute?"

He nodded, shot Star a parting look of sympathy and then left the office.

Owens stepped closer to his first officer's desk. "And you're telling me you've had this theory for a couple of weeks now?"

She looked visibly pained. "You have to understand, sir, I had nothing. A few transmissions which I wasn't even sure were transmissions at all. In fact they could still turn out to be nothing more

than background noise. It was just a feeling, really, that something wasn't right."

Owens sighed heavily and then turned his back on her and took a few steps towards the windows from which Aphrodite sparkled in all its colorful glory. Then he turned to face her again. "Commander, I'm trying to trust you, I really am. But you are not making things easy for me."

"Sir, I—"

He stopped her with a raised hand. "You had no evidence, I understand that. But there was more than enough reason to suspect something. And I don't care if it's just your gut telling you this, as my first officer I expect you to come to me with those things right away."

"I ..." she was trying to think of an excuse but ultimately she knew she didn't have one. "You're right, sir," she said, sounding noticeably deflated by her admission.

"Granted, I haven't made things easy for you since you've come aboard," he said, "so perhaps part of the blame lies with me. But Commander," he added and then took a step closer, "if this is ever going to work between us, I need your full confidence and trust. You understand that, don't you?"

She nodded slowly. Deep inside she wanted to shoot back that it was supposed to be a two-way street. Owens wanted her trust but he was clearly unwilling to give her his. She didn't put those thoughts into words. After all he was the captain and it was his prerogative whom to trust. "Yes, sir."

"I want you to find out what's going on here. If there really is a spy who is responsible for all this, I want to know. And more importantly, I want that person found."

"You have my word."

Owens turned on his heels and had gone as quickly as he had appeared.

Star let herself fall into her chair again and swiveled it around until she faced the windows to stare into the mysterious cloud. Not only did she not have the slightest idea how to do what she had just promised, she didn't even know how she would ever be able to get the captain to place even a shred of trust into her ever again.

- III -

The two women were perhaps more alike than he had guessed, Alex Clancy thought as he considered them while they appraised each other across the table in the interview room. Both had refused but the most basic medical treatment and wore their bruises almost like badges of honor and proof of the battle they had fought.

They were both Bajoran but more than that, they were both proud warriors.

Yunta Fey broke eye contact first, conceding the first round of this battle to her opponent. There was of course little doubt that she already found herself in the weaker position after the altercation in the Nest. Her wrists were shackled together and two armed security guards stood by the wall behind her and within easy reach should she try another ill-advised show of force.

She understood she was in trouble.

"It's not looking good for you, Corporal," said Nora with a half-smile on her lips. The security chief clearly had come around on the issue of suspecting a fellow Starfleet officer to be the culprit. The idea that a Bajoran Marine could have been involved had not sat particularly well with her either. But a good fight had the tendency to change one's perspective on things.

Yunta glanced up at her briefly, glowering at the other woman before diverting her eyes once more.

"We can do this one of two ways," Nora said. "You can come clean with us now, tell us everything and make a full confession. You do that and I'll promise to do whatever I can to ensure the court martial will be lenient. Or you can be uncooperative, bide your time until we get back to starbase and you can be assigned a counsel. In which case I will ensure they throw the book at you."

The Marine had a little smile of her own, even if she refused to look at the lieutenant.

"This amuses you?"

"All you have on me is disorderly conduct and striking a superior officer."

"Serious accusations in the Marines, no?" said Clancy who sat next to Nora.

She nodded as she looked at the counselor. "Oh yes, I'll be spending the next few weeks in a brig. Might even lose my rank."

Nora hit the top of the table so forcefully Clancy, Yunta and even the two guards jumped a little. Yunta's eyes were forced back onto the security chief.

"Let's stop playing games," she said. "You killed Gedar. I don't know, maybe you weren't in love with him, you don't seem the type, but you couldn't accept him choosing Decaux over you. It drove you mad and you killed him for it."

Yunta stared at her fellow Bajoran for a moment and then began to laugh. "Nice theory but completely wrong."

"Decaux didn't seem to think so," said Clancy.

"Decaux," Yunta repeated slowly, making it clear that there was little love lost between the two women. She looked right at Clancy when she spoke. "That's probably who you should be looking at more closely. There is something very wrong about that woman. She's off-kilter somehow. I'm sure it wouldn't take much to make her snap."

"And why would she?" Clancy said.

Yunta leaned forward over the table far enough to cause the guards to step closer. But the corporal didn't seem to care, not even when the female security officer placed a hand on her shoulder. Instead her eyes drilled themselves into the counselor. "Because she found out about us, me and Gedar. And she couldn't take it."

"You said it had been over."

She shrugged and leaned back in her chair. "I told you there's something wrong about Decaux. She's not one to reason with."

* * *

Back in the security office, Nora watched as the two security guards were escorting Yunta Fey back to holding.

Clancy could tell that it was eating her up inside. "She's right, you know, we don't really have anything on her."

"So she just goes on a rampage because she's innocent? No, she's involved somehow," she said without ever taking her eyes of the other

women, not even when she glanced back across the room, just before she was taken outside. "Godsdamnit, I hate this."

He sat down close to her. "Maybe you should take a break from this."

Nora looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "A break? I promised the captain that I find whoever did this. And now it looks as if I did and I wish I hadn't. There's no break from that."

Clancy nodded, understanding.

"She's just like me, Alex," she said in a softer tone. "Just like I used to be at her age. Full of anger and rage and ready to boil over at any moment. The smallest thing could've lit my fuse and I might very well have done what she did had I been in that same position."

He considered her for a moment, not missing the fact that she had called him by his first name for the first time since they'd met. Not missing the anguish in her eyes or the vulnerability which had crept into her tone. "Listen to me. I know she reminds you a lot of a younger you and understandably so but you must understand that you are a very different kind of person. You are not the same."

"And how would you know?"

"Because it's my job to know these things. It's my job to understand people, what they think and what they are capable of doing."

"You think I wouldn't have been able to do what she did?"

"Right now, I'm not even convinced that she's the cold-blooded killer you make her out to be," he said.

That hard look returned into her eyes. "Well if she is, I swear I'm going to find out and make her pay," she said and stood. "Let's go speak to Katanga again."

"What for?"

"There's something about Gedar's body I've been wondering about and if I'm right, it might be all the evidence we need to lock her up for good."

* * *

"Are you sure about this?"

"I'll be fine."

"You weren't last time."

"I wasn't prepared last time."

Nora gave him a skeptical look.

"Honestly, It's going to be alright," Clancy said.

The security chief gave Doctor Katanga the nod to proceed and the veteran medic activated the controls with a little smirk, allowing the morgue's receded slab to slide out of the wall and revealing the dead, naked body of Jinlu Gedar.

All eyes were on the counselor who did an admirable job of pretending that the corpse didn't bother him in the least. His eyes were focused on an indistinct spot as he nodded slowly, almost as if to give himself courage. "Let's just get on with it."

Nora couldn't quite manage to wipe that silly smirk off her face as she looked at the equally amused doctor.

However the reality of the situation caught up with them quickly enough and Katanga grew more serious. "I had another look just like you asked."

"Did you find anything?"

"Oh yes. I missed it at first because I attributed the bruising to the accident which had been logged but this was no accident," he said. "The bruises are too deliberate, almost intentional."

"Are you saying Doctor Wenera falsified the records?" said Nora.

Katanga shot her a less than pleased look, clearly not happy with the implication that his close friend and apprentice would have been involved in any kind of illicit activities. It quickly vanished, after all the evidence was damning. "The only reason I can imagine she would've done something like this, is because he asked her to. Jane can be very compassionate and Gedar likely didn't want a record of this."

"So it was no accident," said Clancy. "Did he do this to himself?"

Katanga shook his head. "Some of the bruising is in places that would've made it very difficult for him to self-inflict them."

Nora stepped closer to the naked body. Even though dead for a few days now, thanks to the morgue's stasis field, his body was still nearly perfectly preserved. His dark skin had barely begun to fade. "Somebody did this to him," she said, voicing a theory which had already begun to form in her mind.

"And you think it was Yunta," said Clancy.

“She would have had the strength to do this. Not many other people on the ship could say the same.”

“It’s a theory,” said the counselor.

“I’m afraid it’s more than that,” said Katanga and began to turn the corpse, causing Clancy to grimace slightly at the way he was handling the dead body. The doctor reached for a medical device and ran its bright light over Gedar’s back shoulder to reveal two small and faint semi circles, forming a roughly oval shape.

The security chief leaned in closer. “Are those bite marks?”

Katanga nodded.

She looked up at him. “DNA traces?”

“Too degraded for a perfect match. But Lieutenant, it’s definitely Bajoran.”

Nora stood and aimed Clancy a meaningful look.

- IV -

There was something off about the nebula, she just couldn't quite put her finger on it. Sensors weren't a big help while the runabout was sitting crashed on the surface of the unlikely planet.

Srena had been going through whatever sensor data had not been destroyed by the damage to the small vessel's computer core after the rough landing and run a number of automated algorithms which she hoped would give her a clearer understanding of the make-up of the Aphrodite cloud.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say, Dee?"

Startled, the Andorian turned away from the workstation in the ship's cockpit to spot Commander Leva and Lieutenant Deen enter. She quickly changed the display mode of her console in order to hide her scientific investigation and bring up the ongoing level one diagnostic she had been told to run instead. She felt a little guilty for having had her concentration wander but diagnostics tended to be very mundane affairs.

"I don't want you to say anything," said the Tenarian as she followed the tactical officer. She had discarded both her jacket and her mustard uniform shirt and wore only a gray tank top with her black slacks. "I want you to do something."

He turned around to face her. "Like what? He's the ranking officer on the away mission. He's in charge."

"How can he be in charge if he isn't even around? Our priority has to be to get off this planet and find a way to report back to *Eagle*. As much as I'm intrigued by this world and these stranded Vulcans, we can't let ourselves get distracted."

Leva raised an eyebrow in a very good approximation of the way Xylion would have done. "And that's coming from you?"

She nodded. "That's coming from me."

"So you want me to go find him in that Vulcan colony and drag him back here? Do you suggest I use a phaser?"

"Whatever it takes."

"I don't think that'll be necessary," said Srena when she spotted Commander Xylion through the bulkhead windows as he approached the *Nebuchadrezzar*.

“About time,” said Deen and then headed for the exit, apparently determined to give the science officer a piece of her mind.

Leva and Srena followed her outside.

“How very nice of you to deign us with your presence,” said Deen the moment she had exited the ship. “We weren’t quite sure you’d find your way back to us.”

Xylion didn’t react to the sarcastic tone in her voice and instead continued to approach and only spoke once he was just a few meters out. “Your concern was not justified, I was perfectly aware of the location of the runabout at all times.”

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Could have fooled me.”

“Judging by the tone in your voice I assume that you are displeased for some reason.”

Deen turned to look at Leva, aiming him an incredulous look. “He thinks I’m displeased.”

“We were assuming that you would assist with repairs to the ship, Commander,” said Leva, who in an odd reversal of usual roles actually sounded a great deal more diplomatic than Deen had.

The Tenarian however clearly wasn’t in the mood to mince words. “I am as fascinated by these people as you are, Commander,” she said. “But their notion that we would join their little community here, or that you marry that woman is simply ludicrous. Our priority is clear, get the ship repaired and return to *Eagle* as soon as possible.”

There was a momentary, almost uncomfortable silence between them. Srena stayed well out of the argument, feeling especially awkward, as if she had walked into a fight between her parents.

“Wait a minute,” said Deen. “You can’t tell me you’re actually considering this.”

Leva couldn’t help but smirk, garnering him a less than pleased look from the lieutenant. “Oh come on, the idea that Xylion, of all people, is going off the reservation for a girl is priceless.”

Deen apparently didn’t see the humor.

“Your line of reasoning is flawed,” said Xylion. “I am a Starfleet officer and my curiosity for the settlement and its residents is purely scientific in nature. I have no intention of being betrothed with any of the Vulcans on this world nor do I have designs of joining them.”

Deen looked skeptical.

“You have to admit you’ve been spending a lot of time with these people, Commander and with this Tela women especially,” said the half-Romulan.

“As I have pointed out,” he said and then began to walk towards the ship again, passing his fellow officers without regarding them any further. “Studying the society these people have built for themselves here opens up fascinating research possibilities and Tela has proven to be an excellent case study. Now I suggest we discontinue this line of discussion and focus on repairs. Our priority should be to ensure full structural integrity across the superstructure.”

“We’ve done that already,” said Deen looking after the Vulcan.

Xylion stopped and turned around to consider her.

“You think we’ve just been sitting here twiddling our thumbs while you’ve been on your little field study trip?”

“I see. Very well, in that case, engines and drive components are our next focus. I’ll review your progress as we continue our efforts. Ensign, I will require your assistance with the navigational systems,” he said, apparently considered the discussion concluded and boarded the runabout.

Srena looked at him and then back at Deen and Leva as if unsure of herself. “Yes, sir,” she said quickly and then followed him inside.

“I don’t like this,” said Deen.

“He’s back and he’s helping with repairs,” he said, “that’s what you’ve asked for,” he added and then headed back for *Nebuchadrezzar* himself.

But before he could take more than one step, she stopped him by holding on to his upper arm, causing him to look back at her. “You don’t find all this a little bit concerning? And why exactly are these Vulcans so eager for us to join them? The ones Srena met were not even willing to assist us in any way, not even allowing us to take any spare parts we may require.”

“Since when are you the suspicious type?”

She shrugged her shoulder. “I suppose war does that to people.”

“Well, relax,” he said. “There are no Jem’Hadar around. Let’s just get these repairs done and report back to the ship.”

She nodded slowly but she couldn’t help herself and look over her shoulder and towards the direction of the Vulcan settlement, unable to

shake the feeling that they were being watched. When she spotted nothing but the empty canyon, she shook it off and followed the others.

"It proves nothing."

"Really?" said Nora Laas with obvious skepticism in her voice while she carefully watched Yunta Fey across the table from her. "Bajoran DNA on Gedar's skin proves nothing? Do you think somebody else took a bite out of him? Do you think it was me, Corporal?"

The Marine offered a little smile. "No, somehow I don't quite see you as the type."

Clancy took the reins before a clearly agitated Nora could respond to the jibe. He leaned forward. "But you are, isn't that right? You like to get physical with the people you are involved with."

She shrugged. "Yes, so what? It's not a crime."

"It is if it is involuntary," said Nora.

"Jin liked it just fine."

"Too bad we can't ask him," the security chief said.

Yunta considered the other Bajoran and the counselor. "You really think that just because I liked to play a little rough, I killed him? You can't be serious."

Clancy glanced at a padd. "I'll tell you what we think. That DNA and bruising on Gedar's skin is just a couple of weeks old," he said and then looked right into her eyes. "You had told us that it had been over between the two of you months ago. Instead he received these injuries while he was involved with Crewman Decaux and we know she isn't responsible for them."

Yunta didn't say anything to that.

"Would you like to hear my theory?" said Nora and then continued when Yunta offered nothing more than a scowl in response. "It had been over between you and Gedar months ago and it certainly wasn't a mutual breakup as you would have like us to believe. In fact, I think Gedar got involved with Decaux while he was still with you and you found out about it."

Clancy took over. "And from what I can tell, you are not the kind of woman to cross. You were furious at Gedar for cheating on you with Decaux. You confronted him about it and things turned ugly. And I'm not talking about some sort of mutual sexual practice with a violent

twist. This was pure violence, the bruising on his body leaves little doubt of that.”

“In other words, Corporal, you beat the hell out of him,” said Nora.

Yunta remained silent.

“Would you like legal representation at this time?” said Clancy and judging by Nora’s sidelong look, she wasn’t too happy he’d made the suggestion, she was obviously hoping for a confession.

The Marine stood suddenly, causing Nora to follow suit immediately, already painfully aware that the woman could hold herself in battle. But instead of making any aggressive moves against either investigator, she turned her back to them and walked towards the far bulkhead. She eventually took a deep breath. “Yes, okay, I did hurt him a little,” she said and then whipped around again. “But the bastard had it coming. He didn’t even try to hide the fact that he was fooling around with that little bimbo. Instead he blamed it all on his nature as a Krellonian. Give me a break. What kind of stupid excuse is that? He was fully aware of what he was doing, nobody put a phaser to his head. But he thought that because of his race he had a free pass to do whatever he pleased. Well, I set him straight.”

“You certainly did that,” said Clancy.

She locked eyes with the man and it took her a moment to understand the implication and vehemently shook her head. “Not like that, I didn’t. Yes, I beat him a little the day I found out but that was a couple of weeks ago. After that I didn’t touch him again. Didn’t even speak to him.”

“I find that hard to believe,” said Nora. “By your own admission you were furious with Gedar. You wanted him to pay for what he’d done to you.”

“Yes and he did,” she said and then quickly corrected herself. “I mean, I made him pay that day but that is it. I didn’t kill him.” She continued when she found neither Clancy nor Nora convinced by her words. She took a step closer to the table. “If you are looking for the killer, I think you should have another chat with that civilian engineer.”

“Colcord?” said Clancy.

She shook her head again. “No, not the woman. The professor. I know for a fact he was hanging around engineering at around the time of Jin’s death while he was all alone in there. Plenty of opportunity.”

“Right,” said Nora. “And what would have been his motive to kill Gedar?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know, you’re the detective here, why don’t you find out?” she said. “But Jin clearly had a tendency to get under people’s skin. I’m telling you, I’m not the only one he managed to tick off.”

Nora had apparently heard enough. She pressed a panel on the table and within moments Lieutenant Carlos and another security officer stepped into the room. “Take her to holding.”

“You’re arresting me?” she said incredulously. “On what charge?”

“For now it’s conduct unbecoming and striking a superior officer,” said Nora, holding her intense glare. “Don’t be surprised if we add first degree murder by the morning,” she said and gestured for Carlos to take her away.

“I’m telling you,” she said as she was being escorted out, “you’ve got the wrong person. I did not —” she stopped herself suddenly when the doors to the room parted and she spotted Major Wasco standing outside, watching her carefully as she was being led away. Nora and Clancy didn’t miss how she quickly diverted her glance in apparent shame.

The burly Marine commander watched her go for a moment before he stepped into the doorway of the interview room. “Lieutenant, may I have a word?”

Nora nodded. “Major Wasco. Of course, come in. This is Lieutenant Alex Clancy, he is assisting with the investigation.”

Wasco offered the younger man a sharp nod as he walked into the room, taking the seat opposite the two investigators which Yunta had only recently vacated. “It’s about my man.”

Nora nodded for him to proceed.

“You’ll be charging her?”

“At the moment she is our prime suspect,” said Clancy. “Her relationship with the victim and the way in which it ended give her a strong motive.”

“I see. Do you have enough to convict her?”

Nora and Clancy exchanged quick looks. “Not yet,” said the security chief. “But I expect this to be only a matter of time. We can hold her for now on the charges of getting in a fight with Crewman Decaux

in the Nest. Not to mention taking a few swings at me after I interceded."

The major trained his intense eyes on the Bajoran. "That was completely unacceptable behavior and I sincerely apologize that it came to that."

Clancy shook his head. "Not your fault, Major."

"I'm her commanding officer, Lieutenant. I am responsible for everything she does and if she steps out of line, that is on me."

"Well, we're not going to arrest you for something she did," he said with a little smirk that went unreciprocated.

"Major, no offense, but why are you here?" said Nora.

"I want to ask you to hand Corporal Yunta over to me."

"She's a murder suspect," said Clancy, clearly surprised by the unusual request. "And even if she wasn't, she's disregarded orders and has committed other crimes."

"You've said it yourself," Wasco said. "You have no evidence to definitively link her to Mister Gedar's murder. And as for the other crimes you speak of, as a Marine she should be punished by her peers. And I will see to that personally, I guarantee you that."

The counselor shot Nora a puzzled look, as if he couldn't quite believe that Wasco would be audacious enough to make such a request of them. But Nora kept her eyes on the Marine. "You don't think she did it, do you?"

"No," he said. "I'm convinced she didn't."

"How do you know?" Clancy said.

"For one she had a drill first thing the next morning of the day the murder was committed," he said and looked at Nora. "And she was there, bright eyed and all. You know what that means, she had to hit the bunk early, she wouldn't have had time to stay out late and get into trouble," he added and then focused on the counselor again. "But more importantly than that, Lieutenant, Corporal Yunta is a Marine. I've known her since the first day she put on that uniform. I trained her myself. Turned her from a broken and angry little girl into a formidable warrior."

"You ask me, she's still plenty angry," said Clancy.

"And so would you be if you'd had a life like hers," he said before he made eye contact with Nora again. "She isn't all that different to you, Lieutenant," he continued. "She went through much the same things

you did back on Bajor and I bet she was just as angry and frustrated about her life. You know she once told me that you were her inspiration for joining the Marines. She figured if you had made it to where you are now, then so could she." He shook his head slightly. "I've tried very hard with her. And I know she is nowhere near where you are now," he said. "Sometimes her anger still boils over and gets the better of her but she has ways to control it."

"Like when she went off at Crewman Decaux and then at Lieutenant Nora? Like when she beat Gedar senseless after finding out that he had cheated on her?" said Clancy.

Wasco shot the man an astonished look, apparently not having known about the Gedar beating.

"What makes you so sure that this time she didn't control her anger?" he continued.

Wasco quickly managed to put on a more confident face again. "I don't expect you to understand, Lieutenant, but as Marines we go through challenges together that not only bond us in a way which would be difficult for you to understand, it also means that we know the people we fight alongside with better than we know ourselves. And I've fought with Yunta and I can say without a shadow of a doubt that she would not have killed Gedar in this manner."

"I'm sorry, I'm not buying this whole Marines' ethos thing. No offense, Major, I know you and your men accomplish extraordinary feats but that doesn't mean that they are above suspicion."

"That is not what I'm saying. But I am vouching for Corporal Yunta. She did not do this."

Nora once again activated the control panel on the table and within moments Carlos reappeared. "Lieutenant, please hand over the prisoner to Major Wasco."

"Sir?" he said, clearly confused by the order. He wasn't alone; Clancy shot the security chief a befuddled look as well.

Nora ignored them all and kept her eyes on the major instead. "You'll keep her under guard at all times and she'll not be allowed to move freely around the ship."

Wasco stood. "You have my word, Lieutenant. And thank you," he said and then left the room, following Carlos to the holding cells.

Nora could feel Clancy's eyes on her and decided on a preemptive strike. "She's got nowhere to go. Makes little difference if she's in our holding cell or under guard by the Marines."

"It's the principle of the matter," he said. "She's our prime suspect in a murder investigation. She should be treated as such. I think the good major got to you with his whole, she's-just-like-you speech. Or is it that Marines always look out for each other?"

Nora sighed. "You said it yourself, we don't have enough evidence to charge her. We keep investigating Yunta until we've got a solid case. And once we do, I'm going to drag her into a cell myself."

Alex Clancy grinned.

"What?"

"Just never thought I'd see the infamously hard-assed Nora Laas going soft."

"Stow it."

- VI -

“Srena, let’s go get some rest. We need to get up with the first light to continue with the repairs,” said Deen as she headed towards the back compartment of the runabout, barely stifling a yawn herself.

“I’ll be right there,” she said without interrupting her efforts on the workstation she was sitting at. “I just want to go through this data real quick.”

The Tenarian stepped up behind the blue-skinned ensign to look over her shoulder and spy onto the display. “Sensor analysis?”

She nodded. “I found that some of the data I took of the nebula has survived the landing. I just want to quickly look it over,” she said and then made eye contact with Deen behind her, not missing the doubt in her eyes. Considering how frustrated she had been with Xylion for prioritizing the Vulcan settlement over essential repairs, she tried to dispel any concerns with a smile. “I promise it won’t take long. The computer is just finishing an analysis of the data and I wanted to get it done before we continue repairs, in case we lose some of it.”

Deen’s features softened and she returned the smile. “Good thinking. But don’t take too long. The repairs should take precedent to scientific study. At least for the time being.”

“Yes, of course.”

The lieutenant offered a parting smile, not hiding how impressed she was with the young ensign’s dedication and then departed for the bunks in the back of the ship.

A soft trill from her computer station caused Srena to focus back on the screen. The results were in. “Wait, that can’t be right,” she said to herself even as her fingers were already racing across the panels, trying to verify the data. But when the output refused to change, she decided to start over, no matter that it could take another couple of hours to complete. This was too important, too significant not to be certain about it. The implications were immense and if the findings held up, she knew it could change everything. Deen, Leva and of course Xylion would have to know. The captain had to be made aware as well, and as soon as possible, as this revelation could change the entire scope of their mission.

A sudden noise startled the ensign and she turned to look behind her. "Lieutenant?"

But there was nobody there. No answer.

The sound returned. It was almost as if somebody was working on the outside of the runabout.

Srena stood. "Commander, is that you?"

Again nothing.

She looked out of the viewport but could see nothing outside in the dark.

Another soft, metallic bang convinced her somebody was definitely outside.

She slowly made her way to the airlock. She considered getting one of the senior officers but then dismissed the idea. She didn't want to wake them if it turned out to be nothing more than the wind or perhaps a wild animal.

She opened the inner airlock and then the outer one as well and without stepping out of the ship, she craned her neck out. She could see nothing of consequence. "Hello? Anyone out here?"

She thought she heard a sudden shuffle but couldn't be sure. It was coming from the nose of the runabout.

The ensign slowly stepped out of the ship and staying close to the hull moved towards the front. "Hello?" she said again but once again got no response.

She approached the nose very carefully and then ventured a look around the corner, immediately spotting the source of the sound. An access panel had been removed to expose the innards behind.

Srena stepped up to it and then looked around but could see nobody who could've been responsible for removing the small hatch.

She took a knee in front of it to see if any damage had been done.

Before she could get a good look at what had happened, another sound startled her and this time it was unmistakable footsteps.

She looked to her right to see a person right in front of her and gasped with surprise.

"Oh, it's you," she said once she recognized the familiar face and then stood. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

- VII -

Clancy noticed the young man entering the security office immediately. And even though he wore a mustard colored undershirt, he obviously didn't belong. Over the last few days the counselor had gotten to know almost all of the members of *Eagle's* security team but he couldn't recall having seen the red-haired crewman's face before.

And then there was the fact that he looked nervous being there. He had taken only a couple of steps into the room and it almost looked as if he was reconsidering having come here at all.

Clancy looked around, it was late in the day and he noticed that the few security people on duty were not paying the newcomer any attention. He quickly jumped out of his seat but by the time he was approaching him, he seemed to have decided to leave again and was just about to turn away.

"Can I help you?"

He turned back around, seeing the counselor aiming an easy smile at him.

"Uh ... I was just leaving.

"You know, I could be wrong about this, but something tells me you came here to speak to somebody."

"Yeah, I guess I kinda did."

"And I'm kinda here to listen."

The crewman nodded but didn't say anything further.

"Could this be about the ongoing investigation into Lieutenant Gedar's death?" Clancy said.

He looked at him with widening eyes. "How'd you know?"

"Lucky guess."

"Listen, I don't want to get anybody in trouble."

He nodded understandingly. "Of course not. But if you know something that could help us, you really shouldn't keep it to yourself."

"Yeah," he said and then looked around the security office, apparently looking for somebody.

Clancy thought he knew why. "Lieutenant Nora isn't here right now but you can talk to me."

His smile was uneasy. "Actually, I think I would prefer that. I've heard stories about her. She can get a little uh ... intense, I guess."

"Tell me about it," he said and led him into the interview room. "Just talk to me for now and I'll fill her in later."

This seemed to be putting him at ease and he followed him into the room and then identified himself as Crewman Asher Sanzenbacher, an engineering specialist.

Clancy remembered his name. "You were on duty of the night of the murder. You discovered the body."

He nodded slowly.

"If I'm not mistake we already took your statement."

He didn't say anything to that.

Clancy could tell that he was concerned. "Why don't you take a seat?"

Sanzenbacher did as suggested.

"Tell me what it is you remembered about that night that you may have forgotten to mention before."

He made eye contact again but apparently Clancy's calm tone encouraged him. "I'm not sure how important it is or if it means anything at all but there was a meeting about an hour before I found the lieutenant's body in engineering."

Clancy nodded. "Yes. Between Hopkins, Gedar, Rosenthal and Colcord."

"That's right. I was walking past the meeting room at about 2315 hours and I stopped for a moment because I was hearing pretty loud voices coming from inside. After a moment I realized it was an argument."

"Could you make out what it was about?"

"Not everything but it was clear that Miss Colcord didn't want Gedar on the team working on the sensor array and she wasn't shy in letting Lieutenant Hopkins know."

"How bad was it?"

"Oh it was bad. Colcord was shouting at that point and the weirdest thing was that the chief was shouting right back. I don't know how well you know Lieutenant Hopkins but she practically never shouts at anyone. She hardly even raises her voice to people. I swear I've never heard her so agitated."

"And all this was about Gedar being part of the project?"

“I think so. Or maybe Lieutenant Hopkins did not appreciate the way in which Colcord was talking to one of her people. She tends to be quite protective of us.”

Clancy thought about this for a moment. “Then what happened?”

“I heard footsteps heading for the doors so I quickly walked on. I didn’t want to be caught eavesdropping. But I turned around one more time before I reached the corner and I saw them come out.”

“Them? You mean Gedar?”

He shook his head. “No, both Gedar and Hopkins came out together and then—” he said and stopped, apparently developing second thoughts.

“And then what, Crewman?”

It was obvious that he didn’t want to say the next part and avoided making eye contact with the counselor.

“It’s okay, you can tell me.”

He looked up and right into his eyes. “Hopkins and Gedar walked away together and back towards main engineering.”

That came as complete news to Clancy. According to the statements made, Gedar had left the meeting early but nobody had mentioned that Hopkins had accompanied him. So far they had operated under the assumption that Hopkins had stayed in the meeting room along with Colcord and Rosenthal. “Is there anything else you remember?”

He shook his head. “No. I left and went to impulse drive control where I stayed with another engineer until I returned to main engineering and found—”

The door to the room opened to allow Nora Laas to stick her head in. “What’s going on?”

Sanzenbacher immediately jumped onto his feet.

“Ah, Lieutenant, there you are,” said Clancy casually.

But Nora was peering suspiciously at the other man. “Crewman Sanzenbacher?”

“Ma’am.”

Clancy left his seat. “Anyway, thank you for coming in, Crewman. We’ll call you if we need to speak to you again.”

Sanzenbacher looked at Clancy, seemingly relived and then back at Nora who continued to stare daggers at the man. “Ma’am,” he said and then managed to quickly slip out and passed her towards the exit.

“What was that about?” she said.

“The crewman had something to tell us.”

“Really? And why exactly didn’t he tell me?”

He shrugged innocently. “Some people prefer talking to a counselor than to a security officer, didn’t you know that?”

She seemed visibly annoyed by that.

“Don’t worry, I’ll fill you in. But I’m afraid you’re not going to like it.”

Day Seven: The Devil in Disguise

- I -

0535 hours was the perfect time on *Eagle* for an early morning run around the ship's saucer section. With the slowest shift of the day still on duty for the next few hours and most everyone on alpha shift still fast asleep, this was usually the time the ship was almost serene and the corridors barely frequented. And Nora Laas appreciated the quiet for her morning routine as she began her warm up stretches near to her quarters on deck nine.

The only problem: It was already 0540 and she was not yet on the move.

After she had let slip of her morning run to Clancy he had quickly shown interest and asked if he could join her. At first she had been hesitant but after he had revealed that he had been looking to start a ritual of his own but had never found anyone willing to partake, she had ultimately agreed to let him join her.

However he was late.

Nora noticed the odd glances she received from the few, mostly male crewmembers who passed her by. It didn't take her long to realize why. She normally wore an old Marines shirt and sweatpants when she ran her laps in the morning. But since investigating Corporal Yunta as a prime suspect in her murder case, she had felt it inappropriate. So instead this morning she had decided to go with a simple combination of a black athletic bra and matching shorts, showing off a lot more skin than she did usually. And both, she suddenly realized, were also a lot tighter than her normal workout clothes, showing off all her feminine curves as well as her athletic figure.

Her choice of outfit had nothing to do with the fact that she was expecting company this morning, or at least that's what she told herself. She wasn't trying to show off, she had simply not given her wardrobe much thought when she had asked the replicator to produce something appropriate. But Alex Clancy of course was a counselor. A psychiatrist very much trained to analyze people's behavior and their reasoning. Seeing her like this, he could infer a completely mistaken meaning to

her attire and so she quickly resolved to return to her quarters and select something far less revealing.

She only managed a few steps before she spotted him approaching her hurriedly.

"Lieutenant?" he said as he came jogging down the corridor, wearing running shoes, shorts and a Starfleet Academy t-shirt. "I'm so sorry, I'm late. I could've sworn I told the computer to wake me at 0520."

To his credit he didn't even seem to notice her outfit.

Nora wasn't sure if to feel relieved or annoyed that he didn't even snuck so much as a peek. After all she was proud of her body. Or at least of the work she had put into it and not many people ever got to see so much of it.

"Are you alright?" he said, when she didn't speak. "Where you going somewhere?"

She shook her head. "No. Just waiting for you. You ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"Good. Let's get started."

"How many are we doing?"

"I like to do thirteen laps," she said and offered a little smirk when she noticed his eyes opening wider. "But perhaps seven will do this morning."

"Oh, please, don't take it easy on my account."

Soon after they were off, jogging alongside each other on deck nine's widest corridor which completely circumferenced the elliptically shaped saucer section. As expected there was fairly little traffic to dodge at this early hour.

Nora was not used to having slower company on her morning run and reduced her pace, not only to avoid burning Clancy out to early but also to allow them to discuss their progress on the Gedar investigation.

"I have to admit, this case is becoming more and more convoluted. Just when you think you have your suspect, something else comes out of nowhere," he said.

"We shouldn't dismiss Yunta just yet."

He turned to look at her, even though she kept her eyes trained forward. "And this is coming from you."

She aimed him a look. "What does that mean?"

"You're the one who was determined of her innocence. You're the one who let her out of the brig."

Nora shook her head. "Not because I think she's innocent."

Not wanting to rehash their conversation about her logic of letting Yunta Fey rejoin her Marines contingent, the counselor moved on. "Alright, so now we've got Hopkins and Gedar leaving their meeting together just a few minutes before he died. Something nobody seemed to think was important to tell us."

The Bajoran didn't say anything to that.

"What I cannot figure out is why nobody would tell us," he continued. "I can see why Lieutenant Hopkins would want to keep this under wraps so as not to implicate herself but what about Rosenthal and Colcord. Why didn't they say anything?"

"Lou probably just forgot."

"Really?" he said, perplexed. "Forgot? To point out that she may have been the last person to see him alive."

"She wasn't. We know that. He returned to engineering and was seen there by Kolrami and others."

"Still, the fact that she didn't—"

"Rosenthal and Colcord are the real story here," she said, cutting him off. "According to Sanzenbacher that argument got a lot more heated than anyone was willing to admit to. Colcord was furious."

"So was Hopkins according to Sanzenbacher."

"She was just defending her man."

"Well, you know her much better than I do, you tell me if that's normal behavior for her."

She had nothing to say to that. "Why was Colcord so agitated?"

"Clearly because she has history with him. He broke her heart back at the Academy, maybe even made her leave and now she has to unexpectedly work with him again," said Clancy.

But Nora shook her head. "There's got to be more to it. And why did Rosenthal go to see Gedar in his quarters the day before his death? Are you telling me you're buying his story about him wanting to brainstorm about his own invention in private after having made it abundantly clear to everyone involved that he didn't wish to discuss the project with any Starfleet officer?"

"It's not impossible."

“And what about Yunta claiming to have seen Rosenthal around engineering shortly before his death?”

“If she’s guiltily, she’s obviously trying to deflect blame.”

She turned her head to look at him. “I thought I was the skeptic here.”

“Okay, let’s assume you’re right and Rosenthal is involved. What’s his motive? As far as we can tell he didn’t have a ... a relationship with ... uh ... with Gedar.”

Nora smirked. Clancy was running out of breath and it had not gone unnoticed by her that he had slowed over the last few minutes. “Do you need us to take a break?”

He quickly waved her off. “I’m ... I’m fine.”

“Just five more laps.”

“Five ... more?” he said in surprised, clearly having thought they were much closer to their target already. “No ... problem.”

And yet he couldn’t quite match his earlier pace again. Nora showed pity and slowed. “There is something about Rosenthal and Gedar we’re not seeing,” she said. “Some sort of connection.”

“The only connection we’ve got right now,” he said, taking his time to speak, “is Colcord.”

“And the fact that he was clearly quite impressed with Gedar. Much more so than Colcord.”

That’s when Clancy slowed to a trot and when Nora looked over she realized he was no longer at her side. She turned around to find him having come to complete stop a few meters behind her.

“About that break you mentioned. Maybe I do need it after all.”

She stopped herself. “Perhaps seven laps were a bit ambitious for a beginner.”

“It’s just I haven’t done anything like this in a while. Probably not since the Academy.”

She nodded. “Let’s grab some water and head for the gym.”

“The gym?”

“Of course,” she said and clasped him good-naturedly on the back as she walked passed him. “You didn’t think just running around the ship is my entire work out regimen, did you? How do you think I maintain this fabulous body,” she added, shooting him a wink over her shoulder.

Apparently that was enough to convince him to follow her.

To his great relief they took the turbolift to the ship's gymnasium and then entered the large facility moments later, each already cradling bottles of water which Clancy sucked down eagerly.

The room, filled with exercise equipment was almost empty, only a couple of other morning birds were using the facility.

Nora walked over to the replicator and retrieved two fresh towels, tossing one to Clancy who, still in the process of gulping water, caught it only clumsily. She then walked up to a weight machine designed to exercise her back muscles and triceps, easily pushing weights with her powerful arms.

"Hey, Doctor, stop staring and start working out," she said when she caught him just standing there, watching her work that machine. She gestured to the device to her side.

"Right," he said quickly, put down his bottle and walked over to the other device, looking over the settings.

"Start on a low setting and work yourself up."

He did as he was told and then looked back at her to make sure he was using it right.

Nora's amusement was evident. "Not a place you come to regularly, I take it."

"I should but ... been so busy lately."

"I know an excuse when I hear one. I have to say though, for a medical professional, I would have thought you'd take better care of your body."

"I'm not sure if you can tell but I'm really more of a mind over body kind of guy," he said and tapped his temple. "That's the muscle I prefer to work out."

"I see," she said. "So I'm nothing more than a simple minded brute to you."

He quickly shook his head. "Absolutely not. In fact I admire you greatly."

"Oh?" she said shooting him a surprised look.

"You are the epitome of strength and resilience. I must say I was mightily impressed the way you took down Yunta in the Nest without even a weapon."

The Bajoran noticed that the remaining two people in the gym had left. She got back on her feet and began to stretch, doing so almost directly in front of Clancy, making it almost impossible for him not to

get a great view. She caught his eye and smiled. "Then maybe we need to get you all strong and resilient as well so that next time I get into a fight, you can help out instead of standing on the sidelines."

"Honestly, I think I might be a lost cause."

"No such thing," she said. "First of all, you've got to learn how to use that machine you're on correctly," she added and stepped closer, changing the settings.

"Oh, that's a lot harder now," he said when he felt the weight resistance go up.

"You need to get your arms all the way into the device," she said and then practically stood over him and in-between his legs, leaning into him and guiding his arm where it was supposed to be.

Clancy clearly couldn't deny the affect her proximity had on him.

And Nora felt it too. She looked down to find that he was now just inches away, his eyes no longer focused on her body but staring intently into hers.

She wasn't sure why she was so affected by him all of a sudden. There had been zero attraction when she had first met Alex Clancy a few days earlier. In fact, if anything she had been mad as hell that Star had assigned him to her investigation and she'd had little qualms about letting her anger out on him initially.

And yet now, having worked with him closely, having come to appreciate his sharp reasoning but also, she had to admit, his sense of humor, his reasonably good looks and his general, almost carefree attitude, she felt something she hadn't felt since Gene Edison.

Nora had never been one to over-think an issue.

She moved her head down further until her lips pressed against his gently. He did not resist, didn't try to stop it or slow it down somehow. Her hands touched his face and then moved down to his neck and shoulders even while their tongues explored each other's mouths.

Clancy reached out for her hips and she felt his touch on her bare sides. Like she had been shocked by a jolt of electricity, she jumped back.

"I'm sorry," he said, even though it was clear he wasn't entirely sure what he was apologizing for.

She looked back at him with a blank expression on her face, almost as if she had no idea what had just happened. What she had

allowed to happen. Then she shook her head and took another step back. "That was wrong, I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize."

"Yes, I do. I shouldn't have done that. And ... I don't know why I did. I'm truly sorry," she said, her words now flying out of her mouth. And before Clancy could say anything else, Nora had already grabbed her towel and fled the room.

- II -

She awoke with the first light and much to her distress following a rather vivid dream featuring her captain and commanding officer in a much more ambiguous role than as her closest friend.

The thoughts had been stirred after Srena's comments about relationships and her mistaken assumption that because she was Tenarian, she must have been involved with somebody on *Eagle*.

She didn't resent the younger woman for those errant thoughts. What she did resent, were her confusing feelings for her captain, ones she had carried with her for over a year now and she had either tried to ignore or otherwise rationalize as nothing more than natural affection she had for him.

There was, of course, no time for this, she told herself. Not while there was war going on and certainly not while stranded on a rogue planetoid inside a nebula. Besides it was clear that there couldn't be a future between her and Owens. He was almost twice her age – not that she felt that should matter – and more importantly her commanding officer and also, quite obviously, interested in another woman altogether.

Deen quickly dispelled all those thoughts like she had done plenty of times before. She got out of her bunk inside the tiny crew compartment and pulled on her pants and her mustard-colored uniform shirt.

"Srena, let's get up and get repairs underway, we've got a busy day ahead of us," she said as she finished zipping up. But when she turned to look at the other bunk she found that the ensign was not there, the sheets seemingly untouched.

She allowed herself a smirk. Srena had been a true surprise already, her eagerness and efficiency rather unexpected considering that she was a wartime recruit and as such never having enjoyed a complete training at the Academy.

Deen left the small compartment and found Xylion stepping out of the one he shared with Leva opposite hers. As expected the Vulcan was already dressed in full uniform, looking flawless all over. "Good morning, Commander."

"Lieutenant."

“What’s the plan?”

“Following ascertaining full structural integrity yesterday we were able to further determine that the impulse engine is beyond our facility to repair. However the remaining thruster modules should be sufficient to take the runabout back into orbit. As the thruster control module has taken no damage, we will focus on repairing the six workable RCS packages,” he said as they walked towards the cockpit together.

She nodded. “With all four of us we should be able to get the packages firing again within a day. Perhaps two.”

“Allowing time for rest and regeneration, I estimate repairs will be completed in 17.23 hours.”

Deen smirked at that. “I’m so glad your allowing for sleep.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “6.2 hours for you, Commander Leva and Ensign Srena. 2.1 hours for myself.”

“Right. Well, I hope you do realize that I get real grumpy if I don’t get my eight hours worth.”

Apparently he had no words to offer to this.

“Listen, Xyl, about yesterday, I’m sorry if I came across a tad tasty. I was out of line. I know you only have our best interests in mind and to suggest otherwise was uncalled for.”

“Your apology is noted but not required, Lieutenant. I understand your concern and that our focus must be on completing repairs in the most timely fashion possible.”

A large smile came over her lips. “Say, you’re not getting soft on me in you old age, are you?”

Another eyebrow climbed towards the ceiling. “Soft?”

“Never mind,” she said.

That’s when Leva stepped into the cockpit to join them, like Deen, wearing his uniform in a more utilitarian manner sans jacket and with the sleeves of his golden shirt rolled up. He rubbed his hands together. “Alright, people, let’s get to work and take this ship back home.”

Xylion retrieved a padd. “I completed a repairs assignment schedule last night to maximize efficiency and tailored to our individual strengths. Commander Leva and I will carry out repairs to the external thruster components while Lieutenant Deen and Ensign Srena will calibrate the internal couplings.”

“Speaking of Srena, anyone seen her this morning?” said Deen.

"She's not in the back," said Leva.

"That's odd."

"Perhaps she has already commenced external repairs," said Xylion.

Deen headed for the airlock and the two others followed her outside. Even though it had only been light for a few minutes, the temperature was already close to thirty degrees centigrade, thanks to the massive subterranean vents close by, filling the atmosphere with superheated gasses.

"Srena, are you out here?" Deen called out.

When she got no response, she looked at the others, concern now etched into her beautiful features.

"Spread out and find her," Xylion said.

The three officers headed out, each into a different direction.

Deen stayed close to the hull and walked towards the bow. It didn't take her long to find something. "Over here," she called out and then picked up the pace when she thought she saw the top of her boots, a sickening feeling spreading in her gut.

She rounded the runabout and found the Andorian lying face down on the ground. "Srena?" she said with palpable concern and knelt next to her. She immediately reached for her neck and felt immense relieve when she found a pulse. But it was far too weak. She carefully turned the short woman over and onto her back and gasped at what she found. Her face was severely bruised and swollen. Azure blood was trickling down the corner of her lips and from her nose. "Srena?" she said again, more forcefully this time, but the ensign didn't even stir. Deen looked over her shoulder. "I found her. She's been injured. I need a med-kit, right now."

It didn't take long for Xylion and Leva to converge on them, Leva arriving with a first aid kit and immediately offering it to Deen. "What happened?"

She shook her head as she retrieved a medical tricorder. "I don't know, I just found her lying here."

Xylion walked passed them and inspected a hatch on the bow of the runabout.

"She's got multiple lacerations, a fractured skull and a severe concussion. It's a miracle she's still alive," said Deen and then quickly found a stabilizing agent, injecting it into her neck.

“What could have done this?” Leva asked. “Some sort of animal?”
But Deen shook her head. “It looks like she was beaten.”

“By whom?”

She looked up, her eyes brimming with anger.

“There appears to be an additional complication,” said Xylion, following his inspection. “Somebody removed the thruster control module.”

Leva retrieved a collapsible anti-grav stretcher from the *Nebuchadrezzar* and they carefully lifted her onto it before returning her to the ship. The runabout was a fully modular vessel and could be outfitted with a complete surgical unit if necessary. Unfortunately their mission had not required extensive medical equipment and so they were forced to improvise and placed her into a spare cot in the large aft compartment. It was not a bio-bed but Deen found some neural monitors which she attached to her forehead and which hopefully would keep her stable.

“We don’t have anything here to treat injuries of this scale,” she said with frustration. “We need to take her back to *Eagle* as soon as possible.”

Xylion was working on his padd. “If we reduce rest periods, we may be able to complete repairs within fourteen hours,” he said and looked up. “However without the thruster control module we have no means to produce sufficient escape velocity.”

“I don’t understand this,” said Leva as he looked down at the still form of Srena, her slowly raising chest the only indication that she was indeed still alive. “Why would they attack her and take the module?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Deen said. “They don’t want us to leave. They already made that much perfectly clear. Srena tried to stop them and they beat her half to death for it.”

“We should not make assumptions without further evidence,” said Xylion.

“What more evidence do you need?” she said. “This was no animal. And who else but the settlers would have been able to remove a part of the ship? It’s clear they are responsible.”

“They are Vulcans.”

“One upon a time perhaps,” she shot back. “But not anymore. Look at her,” she added and pointed at her swollen and bruised face. “Is that the work of Vulcans?”

“She’s right, Commander,” said Leva. “They clearly didn’t take no for an answer and this is their response. They intend on keeping us here at any cost.”

“That is not logical,” he said. “If their aim was to assimilate us into their society, why would they cause life threatening injuries to Ensign Srena?”

“Who knows,” said Deen. “Maybe they don’t like Andorians. Maybe they don’t know their own strength. Maybe they lost control,” she said and walked over to a weapons locker to retrieve three phasers. “It doesn’t matter, really. We need to get the module back and get off this planet.”

Leva accepted the weapon but Xylion hesitated.

Deen shot him a dark scowl. “We need to take action. Now.”

Xylion nodded and took the weapon. “Very well, I shall go and talk to them.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“I do not believe that to be a good idea.”

“I don’t care. They attacked us, Commander. In the most vicious and cowardly manner possible. I know I’m normally the last person to call for arms and I have no intentions of escalating this conflict but if they do, you’d be on your own against an entire settlement.”

“I’ll go with Xylion,” said Leva.

“We need somebody to stay with Srena,” said Deen.

Leva nodded when he spotted the fire in the lieutenant’s eyes. She had been right to say that she wasn’t the aggressive type. In fact quite the opposite was the case. DeMara Deen was by her very nature a pacifist who abhorred the use of violence to settle a dispute. Nevertheless she had come to learn how to use it in her time in Starfleet and the last few years of war had changed something within her. It was that anger, now clearly awoken and shimmering underneath the surface which required her to go and face those responsible for this unwarranted crime.

“Very well,” the tactical officer said. “But don’t get into a fight you cannot win. In fact, try to avoid a fight altogether. If you think it may come to one, get the hells out of there and fall back to the runabout. If you have absolutely no other choice, set your phasers to heavy stun and don’t be afraid to use the wide-beam setting if you get surrounded.”

Deen and Xylion adjusted their weapons as advised. Moments later they were on their way. The Tenarian taking the lead.

- III -

"We had a minor setback when the we lost power to two cargo bays because of that EPS grid ... uh ... incident," said Louise Hopkins to give the captain an update on the sensor array construction in the observation lounge, along with Tazla Star, Doctor Katanga as well as Nora Laas and Alex Clancy in attendance. Nobody missed that the young engineer had hesitated when referring to the incident in which one of her own had been involved and suspected of foul play. Hopkins had fiercely defended Kate Smith's innocence. "We were able to convert the secondary shuttle bay to coordinate construction efforts instead. We won't be able to launch any shuttles from there for a while but we'll still have the main shuttle bay operational."

Owens nodded. "Are we still on schedule?"

"Absolutely," she said. "The external framework is already complete and sensor pallet installation should be finished by the end of tomorrow. After that we'll do final calibrations and we should be ready for our first test run."

"Good work, Lieutenant," said the captain. "And please communicate this to the rest of your team as well as to Professor Rosenthal and his people. I think we'll let you get back to your work now. Thank you for the report."

Hopkins nodded shortly, made very brief eye contact with Nora Laas, and then left the observation lounge.

"What is the update on the murder investigation?" the captain continued once the chief engineer had gone.

The question had clearly been posed to Lieutenant Nora but when she didn't respond immediately, Clancy fielded it instead. "Our best lead remains Corporal Yunta. She had means, motive and opportunity," he said from where he sat. Nora had chosen a chair just about as far away from him as physically possible.

Owens shook his head sadly. "That a Starfleet officer, serving on this ship, could be able of such a despicable crime. I have to be honest, it's hard to swallow."

The Trill first officer seemed to have fewer difficulties accepting such a reality and leaned forward, first looking towards the security

chief, but when she refused to make eye contact, she focused on the counselor instead. "But you haven't charged her yet?"

"Well, no," he said. "There are still some questions —"

"There are still other suspects," Nora said, speaking up for the first time since the meeting had started.

"What other suspects?" Star said.

When Nora didn't immediately respond, Clancy jumped back in. "It appears Lieutenant Gedar had managed to make a number of enemies on the ship. He was involved with multiple women on board and members of Rosenthal's team had personal history with him as well."

The captain frowned, clearly not happy hearing such stories about a former crewmember.

"It's been four days since Gedar was murdered, we need to bring this investigation to a close and get the guilty party behind bars before they can strike again," said the first officer.

The Bajoran glared at the other woman. "I'm sorry, Commander, I was under the impression you wanted to make sure we have the right person before we charge somebody with this crime. If you prefer of course that we ruined somebody's life and career over a whim —"

Star glared right back. "My understanding was you had more than a whim to implicate Yunta," she said in a tone icy enough to freeze over a small sun.

Owens quickly inserted himself. "Let's be absolutely certain before we charge anyone of murder. I trust we are able to hold the corporal until we have more definitive proof."

Clancy looked uncomfortable answering that and avoided looking back at the captain.

"You do have her locked up, Lieutenant, don't you?" said Star, her piercing eyes resting on the security chief.

"I've released her into Major Wasco's custody for now."

She looked shocked at this. "You can't be serious? She's a prime murder suspect. She belongs —"

Nora leaned forward suddenly, projecting her anger. "Commander, I was a Marine once. And I fully trust Major Wasco and his people to handle this situation with all appropriate means both for the safety of this crew and that of the corporal herself."

Star glanced at the captain as if to say that she couldn't believe how Nora had decided to handle this. But Owens remained unmoved, regarding the security chief carefully. "Very well, Lieutenant. We shall trust your judgment on this."

Nora took her baleful eyes off the Trill to look at the captain. "Thank you, sir."

"But I expect results," he said, his voice taking on a harder edge. "Right now there is a killer on my ship and I cannot abide by that. I fully expect you to have identified the culprit before we leave this nebula. I do not want to have to bring in external investigators to resolve this crime."

"You won't, sir."

He nodded and then looked at his first officer. "Where do we stand with the investigations into these strange occurrences that have been happening?"

"Both Culsten and Smith are currently restricted to quarters. Both are still insisting that they have no idea what happened to them."

He considered the doctor. "Do we believe them?"

"I've been doing this a long time, Captain, and I have seen a lot of strange and crazy things. Mind control, memory wipes, split-personality syndromes and what have you," he said. "I've tested both these kids for all of that and everything else I could think of and so far I have found nothing which could explain it."

"Let's assume for a moment they were not influenced somehow," said Owens. "And that their actions were malicious and pre-determined. What would be their motive for doing so?"

Star took that one. "Sabotage."

Owens looked skeptical.

"We already have circumstantial evidence that suggests that we may have a spy on board. The hidden transmissions I was able to locate seemed to imply somebody had been sending unauthorized messages to unknown parties. What we are doing here, building the sensor array, could significantly alter the course of this war. If the Cardassians or the Dominion had a spy on this ship, they would greatly benefit from our efforts being disrupted."

"I'm sorry, sir," said Nora and looked right at the captain when she spoke, "but if you ask me that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.

Culsten has served on this ship as long as most of us. He's been nothing if not loyal to a fault. What possible reason could he have to betray us?"

"How much do you know about the lieutenant?" Star said sharply, once again glowering at the Bajoran.

"More than you, I'm sure."

She smirked. "Really? So then, did you know that the Krellonian Star Empire which is not a member of the Federation and with which we barely even have diplomatic relations with has only recently signed a non-aggression pact with the Dominion? Did you know that they have a comparatively ruthless intelligence network and a monetary based economy in which material wealth is almost as much, if not more, revered as in the Ferengi Alliance?"

The blank look on her face, all their faces, told her that nobody in the room had known this. Had known much about anything about the enigmatic and mostly isolated people from which Lif Culsten hailed.

"How do you know all of this?" said Owens.

"I still have quite a few contacts in the intelligence community," she said and knew Owens had no reason to doubt that, considering her history.

He nodded. "Alright, at this point I'm certainly not willing to rule anything out, the stakes are too high. But let's say, for argument's sake, Culsten is somehow involved in this, perhaps by pressure he's been put under by his own people, how do you factor Smith is involved?"

"I'm not sure yet. But there is a connection. I haven't ruled out yet that Gedar was involved as well. After all he was a Krellonian as well and friend's with Culsten. Gedar worked closely with Smith in engineering and –"

Nora leaned back in her chair and uttered an exasperated sigh. "Great, now we've got a ship-wide conspiracy on our hands."

"Lieutenant, I would prefer you did not interrupt me again."

A chastising look from the captain stressed her point and Nora offered a contrite look in response. "I apologize," she said, even though when she looked back at Star, it didn't quite ring true. "But if we're playing a game of separation here as a basis for some sort of conspiracy, there'd be no end to it. Everyone on board is connected in some way or form, most obviously by the fact that we're all on the same ship to begin with."

"I realize this, Lieutenant, and I'm still working on my theory."

Nora swallowed a flippant response to this when she saw Owens' hard eyes focused on her. "Sir, permission to be excused to carry out *my* investigation," she said, the implication not all that subtle, that hers was the only one with any real merit.

He nodded. "By all means," he said and looked at both her and Clancy to let them know to get on with it, perhaps even a little bit relieved to not have the two women in the same room together.

Moments later the security chief and the counselor were gone. It escaped nobody's notice however that Nora hadn't even waited for her supposed partner, hadn't even as much as looked at him from the moment they had arrived.

"Well, that was a fun meeting," said Katanga after they were gone. "Is it just me or did it just get five degrees warmer in here?"

Star gave the veteran physician a look to let her know that she didn't think his observations were helping.

He nodded. "Just me, then."

She turned to the captain. "Sir, Lieutenant Nora's colorful insights aside, something else is happening on this ship than a murder investigation and we need to find out what it is."

"An EPS explosion nearly took out two decks, Commander and I have a helmsman apparently dead set on commandeering my ship. I'm fully aware that things aren't right here," he said and stood. "Find out what it is and make it stop," he added before he headed out of the doors.

Katanga raised an eyebrow. "I wonder if it's too late to ask Jane to come back."

Star uttered a heavy sigh and let herself fall back into her chair.

- IV -

"How come civilian engineers always think they are the gods' gift to the universe?" said Lieutenant Jin Gedar as he entered main engineering, clearly in a foul mood.

Crewman Christina McPhee chuckled at that. "Must be your charming personality."

"Yeah," he said. "That and the fact that they haven't got a single original thought in those big useless brains of theirs."

The young woman offered a surprised look. "I thought Rosenthal's transphasic shield design is pretty damn clever."

"It's nothing short than ingenious."

McPhee apparently didn't know how to respond to that.

"I bet the Orions or the Ferengi would have paid through their noses to get their hands on that," the lieutenant continued. "That would have been one hell of a payday."

Crewman Telrik turned from his workstation. "As there is no monetary economy within the Federation, it would be illogical to seek any kind of financial compensation for the shield design."

Gedar smirked. "Telrik, my friend, your imagination is far too limited. There is more out there than the Federation and riches you could hardly fathom with that far too logical mind of yours."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow in response.

"Gedar."

The lieutenant turned at hearing his name being barked sharply across main engineering to see the only other crewmember currently on duty during the late shift. He sighed heavily. "Sirna."

"Enough with these pointless observations," he said as he walked over to the trio. "There is much work to be done."

"Really? Like what? It's the middle of the night and we're all exhausted from running double shifts to work on that blasted sensor array. Maybe we should take it easy for a few hours, what'd you think?"

The Zakdorn quickly shook his head. "Your lack of dedication to duty is both appalling and concerning, Lieutenant. I have half a mind to report your attitude to Lieutenant Hopkins."

"What, again?" he said and flashed McPhee a quick smile, showing just how concerned he was by being snitched on by Kolrami.

The other man ignored the statement. "There is quite a bit of routine maintenance work which we can carry out during this shift so that it will not interfere with construction efforts."

Gedar crossed his arms. "You go and knock yourself out. I'll stay here and hold the fort."

"I wish I could say I was surprised about your attitude, Lieutenant," he said and turned to the two crewmen. "Telrik, McPhee, I want you two to go and investigate the plasma injectors in the starboard warp nacelle. They could use an overhaul."

The two crewmen acknowledged, grabbed a toolkit each and headed for the exit.

"You work these guys too hard," said Gedar after watching them leave.

Kolrami had already stepped up to another workstation. "An assistant chief engineer would understand the value of getting the most out of his people."

"Or he would understand when to allow for some downtime to keep the minds fresh and the bodies relaxed."

The Zakdorn was working on his station. "If you ever get the chance to become the ACE you may test that theory but I find that unlikely."

Gedar smirked. "Not as unlikely as you may think."

"I don't like the modulation output of the main deflector array. I think I will go and run a local diagnostic to be safe," he said and then reached for a toolkit himself.

"What and leave me here all by myself?"

Kolrami was already on his way to the exit. "An assistant chief engineer would have little difficulties taking charge of engineering on his own. Try not to break anything important while I'm gone," he said and stepped through the double doors which had obediently parted for his departure.

Gedar stood like frozen as the computer beeped loudly. "*End of simulation. No further data exists beyond time index 02330.43.*"

"Computer, re-run simulation."

"Computer, belay that order," said Nora Laas who stood to the side with Alex Clancy after they had watched the holodeck simulation of the night of Gedar's murder play out in front of them for the third time in a row. "We've seen enough. There is nothing here."

"I'm not so sure," said Clancy as he walked around Gedar to consider the man carefully. "I think we're missing something."

Nora sighed. "The only thing this simulation confirms is that Gedar was left alone in engineering before he was killed. That and that Kolrami clearly didn't like him very much. We already knew all that."

But Clancy didn't respond.

"Lieutenant," she said sharply. "We're wasting our time here."

The counselor turned to look at the security officer. "It's back to lieutenant, then, is it?"

"That is your rank, is it not?"

He nodded. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"There is nothing to talk about."

"You kissed me."

"I made a mistake."

"Hell of a mistake."

"Lieutenant, I would prefer if you drop this matter before I ...," she didn't finish the sentence.

He took a step towards her. "Before you do what?"

Nora locked eyes with the man. "Before I do something else I regret."

Her hard eyes left little doubt that she was dead serious and Clancy clearly decided it was better not to test her on this and nodded, raising his hands defensively. "Okay, I'll drop it. As a counselor I do think that there is something more to be discussed about what happened but I honor your decision not wishing to face it. That and self-preservation."

She rolled her eyes. "Focus on the case, *Counselor*."

He spread out his arms to emphasize the simulated main engineering in which they stood. "I thought I was trying to do just that."

She sighed. "Our focus should be Yunta. I can't see any evidence here that could connect her to Gedar's murder."

"You said it yourself, you don't want her to be the killer. Maybe we can find something here that could exonerate her," he said. "Let's run it one more time. Humor me."

She sighed heavily. "One more time."

Clancy looked towards the ceiling. "Computer, re-run simulation from beginning."

The computer beeped and reset the program. Once again Jin Gedar entered main engineering in a bad mood, just as was to be expected after having come out of a meeting with Hopkins, Rosenthal and Concord and which he had been kicked out of. He joked with McPhee and Telrik about the engineers and the worth of their designs to the Orions and then egged on Kolrami about the vacant assistant chief engineer spot which they were both apparently in the running for.

"Computer, freeze program," said Clancy just after the other two crewmen had departed, leaving only Gedar and Kolrami in the room. "I can't help but find it odd that he would leave Gedar all alone in engineering," said the counselor.

Nora shrugged. "You heard him say it. He doesn't believe in complacency just because it's a night shift. I happen to agree with his work ethic."

"I have no doubt that you do."

Her stern look wiped that smirk right off his face. "But he also didn't believe Gedar to be a very capable engineer. Fair enough, that evaluation may have been colored by his own preconceptions but still, if he doesn't trust him, why leave him alone in engineering?"

"He didn't plan on it," she said.

Clancy considered a padd he was holding. "He did plan on overhauling the plasma injectors. In fact he made a note in his log earlier that day about it."

"Computer, continue program," said Nora.

Gedar leaned casually against a support beam as he looked at Kolrami's back while he was working at a computer station. "Not as unlikely as you may think."

"I don't like the modulation output of the main deflector array. I think I will go and run a local diagnostic to be safe."

"Freeze program," Nora said and the two simulated officers stopped in their tracks. "There. That wasn't planned. Something came up and he needed that looked into. He clearly didn't trust Gedar to do it so he went himself."

Clancy walked towards the frozen Zakdorn. "Yes, it would certainly appear that way, wouldn't it?"

"Stop testing my patience, please."

The counselor ignored her tasty tone as he studied first the engineer working on the console and then the console itself. "These

displays are supposed to show exactly what they would have seen at the time, correct?"

"That's right. Why?"

"Well, I cannot claim to have extensive technical skills but I can tell that this display is configured to monitor the warp core chamber and not the main deflector," he said and turned to Nora.

She offered nothing but a surprised look in response.

"You lied to us, Lieutenant."

"I did no such thing," the Zakdorn defended himself at Nora's furious claim, while back in the interrogation room.

"And I really don't like liars," she continued as if he hadn't even spoken. "Especially when they wear the uniform."

"I didn't lie to you," Kolrami said through clenched teeth.

Nora placed a padd on the desk and slid it over to him with such force, he struggled to catch it before it went over the edge. "You had no reason to leave main engineering on the day of Gedar's death. There was no problem with the navigational deflector."

His eyes opened wider and then he quickly looked over the padd.

"I have to say, that is one stupid lie to be caught on, Lieutenant, you don't think we would check the records?"

His noticeably blanched at the revelation and after quickly scanning the padd he made eye contact with the security officer again. "Check the logs. I did go to deflector control and carried out maintenance there."

"Logs can be altered," she said.

"But I didn't alter them."

Clancy leaned forward in his chair next to the Bajoran, managing to remain a lot calmer and more collected than his partner as per usual. "You do realize of course what this looks like, Lieutenant," he said and looked deep into the other man's eyes. "Mister Telrik, Crewman McPhee and Crewman Sanzenbacher were all out of main engineering on your orders to carry out various tasks across the ship and then all of a sudden, and with no reason we can determine, you also head out of engineering, leaving Gedar all by himself. Shortly after he's found dead."

The Zakdorn reached for his temples, massaging them nervously.

"You killed him, Lieutenant," Nora said sharply. "You arranged for engineering to be empty, created an alibi for yourself and then returned to throw him down the warp core pit."

He shook his head urgently. "This is ridiculous."

"You didn't like Gedar. You never did. Here was a guy who didn't take anything seriously. Certainly not his job. And now he was

threatening to take away the assistant chief engineer's role which you had worked towards ever since you've joined the crew. And for that he had to die."

Kolrami jumped out of his chair, so fast, it toppled over. "Yes, yes, I hated his guts. Alright? All he ever did was talk about women and his foolish notions of gaining monetary wealth. The man was not fit to serve in Starfleet. He was not fit to wear the uniform," the Zakdorn yelled. "He wasn't even a Federation citizen. What business did he have on this ship?"

Nora leaned back in her chair with a large, satisfied grin now decorating her face.

"But I did not kill him. I would never do that. Do you understand? Never. I would not disgrace my uniform or my family in such a manner and certainly not for a little weasel like Jin Gedar. I didn't do it."

He remained standing there for a moment, exhausted after his tirade, breathing heavily now and looking at the two investigators sitting on the other side of the table. Then he shook his head again. "It's not me you want, it's the Chief."

"Lieutenant Hopkins?" Clancy said.

Kolrami nodded, picked up his chair and sat down again. "Yes."

"That's nonsense," Nora said. "You're trying to accuse her to deflect the blame away from yourself. What possible reason could Hopkins have had to kill Gedar?"

The engineer had calmed himself somewhat before he spoke again. "I saw the two of them together just before he returned to engineering. They were having a rather heated argument."

"And you didn't tell us this before now?" said Clancy, clearly skeptical himself.

"I didn't think it was relevant. And, to be honest, I didn't want to get the Chief into trouble but the more I think of it, the nature of the argument makes it clear to me now that she must have been involved."

"What was the nature of the argument?"

"I'm not entirely sure but I overheard her say that he was going to destroy her career in Starfleet and she was furious about it. I mean, the lieutenant is a very easy-going person but I've never seen her so mad before. I tell you, she had murder in her eyes that night."

Nora stood suddenly. "I don't believe a word you're saying, Lieutenant."

“It’s the truth, I swear on the honor of my family. I don’t know how much that means to you, but to a Zakdorn, his family is sacred.”

She whipped around. “It was you who ordered Telrik, McPhee and Sanzenbacher out of engineering. It was you who went to carry out repairs to the navigational deflector without any evidence something was wrong. Not Hopkins,” she said. “Do you deny that?”

He shook his head. “I don’t. But I had legitimate reasons for all those things. I knew that with the focus on constructing the sensor array over the next few days we would have little time to carry out routine maintenance. I was just being proactive.”

Nora walked over to the door. It slid open and she waved somebody else inside.

The young dark-haired man had a pair of intense black eyes and like Nora wore a mustard colored shirt under his uniform jacket.

She turned back towards her suspect. “Have you met Ensign Andrus Stadi?”

Kolrami shook his head.

“One of our most recent additions to security. Very efficient man. And you wouldn’t believe the benefits of having a full-fledged Betazoid on the team.”

The engineer stood. “Wait a minute, you can’t just – “

“I can’t what, Lieutenant?” she said sharply, interrupting him. “Ask Andrus here to verify your story to determine your innocence you so desperately cling to?” she said and took a step closer to him. “And why not, exactly? Is it because you are hiding something?”

Clancy also stood and faced the Bajoran. “Lieutenant, may I have a word with you?”

Nora looked at him surprised and then back at the clearly rattled engineer.

“Now, please,” Clancy said again.

She uttered a heavy sigh and headed out of the doors, followed by Clancy and Stadi. All three gathered right outside the room. She whirled on the counselor. “What is it? We’re almost there. We’re this close to getting our man,” she said, holding her finger and thumb mere inches apart.

“I’m very concerned about asking a Betazoid to read Kolrami’s mind against his will. It’s immoral and unethical.”

"You've got to be kidding me. Did you hear his rant against Gedar? He loathed that man. He was all but ready to admit of killing him."

Clancy turned to look at the engineer through the window into the interrogation room, still visibly upset, he was now pacing in front of the table. "I'm not so sure."

"Well, I am. And Ensign Stadi here can give us the last piece of the puzzle."

"Lieutenant," the young security officer said, sounding more than a little unsure of himself speaking up in front of his clearly agitated superior. "If I'm perfectly honest, sir, I'm very uncomfortable about this. I've never, uh, read somebody without their consent." He didn't miss the angry look he was getting from his boss, and certainly felt her ire at that moment. "If you give me an order, I will follow it of course, but even then, I'm not sure if I could tell you for certain if he's a killer or not. My skills are more emphatic than telepathic."

"Great."

"Not to mention," said Clancy, "the ensign's testimony based on what he would get telepathically or even emphatically from Kolrami would not be admissible in any Federation court."

"I can't believe this," she said, clearly still fuming. "We're this close on nailing this guy and you're both putting up road blocks. Fine," she said and looked back at the ensign. "Give me your impressions then. Surface feelings, whatever. I know you've done that before, even without somebody's permission," she added and then shot Clancy another look. "And yes, I know, we won't be able to hold it against him."

Stadi considered the engineer in the room closely. "He's afraid, sir, I can tell you that. And he's hiding something," he said and looked at her again. "He's definitely desperate."

"I don't need a Betazoid to tell me that," she said but then continued in a softer tone. "Thank you, Ensign, you're dismissed."

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help," he said just before he left the two investigators alone.

"There is another option."

Nora gave Clancy a quizzical look.

"He could agree to an ARA. An autonomic response analysis. But he would have to volunteer to it. We can't force him to take it."

“Like an encephalographic polygraph?”

He nodded. “The ARA is a little more advanced. It’s by no means fool proof and again, not admissible in a court martial, but it may provide us some answers.”

She turned on her heels and walked back into the room, Clancy quickly following her and they both took their seats again.

Kolrami seemed to notice with relief that the Betazoid ensign had not come back in.

“We will not require Ensign Stadi’s talents at this point,” said the counselor and noticed that Kolrami visibly relaxed.

“Computer,” Nora said without taking his eyes off the engineer. “Set up an autonomic response analysis for Lieutenant Junior Grade Sirna Kolrami the Younger. Security clearance Nora-Foxtrot-Charlie-Four-Niner-Baker-One.”

“Security clearance verified. Proceed when ready.”

“What are you doing?” Kolrami asked.

Clancy shot her a sidelong look. “Voluntary.”

She sighed. “A lie detector test, Lieutenant. You said you didn’t kill Gedar. Well now is the time to prove it. Agree to the test and prove your innocence once and for all.”

Kolrami seemed unsure of himself, looking back and forth between the two officers.

“You said you had nothing to hide,” she added.

He nodded slowly and took the seat. “Fine. Let’s do this.”

Clancy picked up his padd and configured it so that it would tie into the ARA, then he looked at the other man and offering him a disarming smile. “Try to calm yourself and answer my questions truthfully with a yes or no only. We’ll start when you think you’re ready.”

He took a deep breath and then after a few seconds: “Yeah, okay. Go ahead.”

“Computer, commence ARA,” said Clancy.

“Autonomous response analysis for Lieutenant Sirna Kolrami the Younger is now in progress.”

“Lieutenant, is your name Sirna Kolrami?”

“Yes.”

A soft beep from the padd prompted both Clancy and Nora to look down at its display. It showed the result in a bright green box:
Estimated veracity of response: 95.5%

“Are you currently serving as an engineer on the USS *Eagle*?”

“Yes.”

Estimated veracity of response: 97.1%

“Have you ever been to the Andromeda galaxy?”

“What?”

“Please just answer yes or no in order for the computer to establish a baseline to analyze your responses,” Clancy said.

“No.”

Estimated veracity of response: 88.9%

“Are you currently married?”

“Uh, no.”

Estimated veracity of response: 92.7%

“Did you see Lieutenant Gedar on the day he died?”

“Yes.”

Estimated veracity of response: 89.6%

“Did you kill Lieutenant Gedar?”

“No, I did not,” he said sharply.

Estimated veracity of response: 81.1%

Nora frowned when she saw the analysis. The box was still green. She exchanged looks with Clancy.

“Did you witness a heated argument between Lieutenant Hopkins and Lieutenant Gedar on the night Gedar was killed?”

He hesitated for a moment and then nodded. “Yes.”

Estimated veracity of response: 90.3%

Clancy looked back at the security chief, apparently not sure what other questions to ask.

She asked her own. “Are you hiding something from us?”

“I ... uh ... what?”

“Yes or no, Lieutenant,” she said.

“No, I’m not.”

The box turned amber. *Estimated veracity of response: 53.7%*

“What are you *not* telling us?” Nora barked.

“I’m not hiding anything,” he shot back with frustration lining his words.

Clancy shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way.”

He was right; the computer was unable to analyze his last statement.

“Was there anyone else with Gedar on the night before he was killed?” she continued.

“No,” he said angrily.

The box turned into a bright red. *Estimated veracity of response: 22.9%*

Nora leaned forward. “You’re lying.”

The Zakdorn reached for his forehead, looking frustrated. Then he suddenly diverted his glance towards empty space, as if recalling something. “Wait, I did see somebody else.”

“Who was it?” Clancy said.

He looked him straight in the eye. “On my way to deflector control, I’m certain I saw Professor Rosenthal head towards main engineering.”

Nora leaned back in her chair and crossing her arms below her chest, clearly not buying this at all. “And you didn’t tell us that before either?”

“I didn’t think much of it at the time. Certainly not that he was going to engineering but that’s where he must have been headed, thinking of it now,” he said, sounding excited by his own revelation. “Yes, yes, that’s where he was going. I’m sure of it,” he added and then looked at the counselor. “Ask me the question.”

“Did you see Professor Rosenthal outside engineering on the night of Gedar’s death?”

“Yes.”

Nora and Clancy looked at the display. The box turned a bright green. *Estimated veracity of response: 93.4%*.

- VI -

"None of this makes any sense," said a clearly frustrated Nora Laas as she considered the murder board set up in the security office where the latest pertinent statements from their suspects and witnesses had been added.

"In my, admittedly limited experience, there are exactly two kinds of murder investigations. Those where the guilty party is identified within forty-eight hours and then there are those where the investigation drags on over weeks, sometimes without ever getting enough evidence to convict anyone. We might be in for a long haul for this one."

The security chief resolutely shook her head. "That cannot happen here. We need to find somebody before we're out of the nebula which means we have maybe three or four more days but that's it."

"I was not aware there was a time limit on this investigation."

"I made a promise to the captain."

He frowned at that.

"Besides, once we get out of here and return to the nearest starbase, JAG will simply take over and bring in their own investigators. I'd be damned if I let some outside people handle this investigation. Or worse: Tazla Star."

"Right," he said. "That would be truly awful."

She aimed him a scolding look. "We have more than enough suspects each with their own motives. I'm convinced we've already talked to our killer, we just have to get that last piece of missing evidence to make that final connection."

"The easy part then."

When Nora was about to unleash one of her deadly looks again, Clancy quickly raised his arms in surrender. "Okay, okay. We can figure this out, I'm sure. Let's start from the beginning and put the pieces together," he said and walked closer to the board, tapping a control and to Nora's surprise the transparent surface was cleared of all content. "Best to start with a blank slate," he said and produced a short, stick-like device. He removed a cap at the very end to reveal a thin, felt-covered tip.

"What's that?"

He held up the stick. "A marker pen. I thought we'd go old-school on this," he said and then drew a small black x-mark at the very center of the board.

"What the hells are you doing?" she said when she saw him defacing the sensitive screen.

"Don't worry, this isn't permanent," he said, offering a little grin over his shoulder. "Doctor Katanga has narrowed down the time of death to close to 2345 hours, plus minus ten minutes," he said and wrote that number underneath the x and then drew a big circle around it. "What do we know so far?"

Nora nodded after she realized what Clancy was up to. "According to multiple witnesses, Gedar returned to main engineering at 2322."

Clancy created a small mark to the left of the x and wrote the time and a short description. "And he returned with Louise Hopkins."

The security chief quickly shook her head. "No, he didn't."

"According to Kolrami –"

"According to Kolrami," she interrupted, "he saw them together arguing but that was just before he returned to engineering by himself."

He nodded to accede the point and noted the Hopkins argument for 2320. "I suppose next we have Kolrami and the rest of the duty crew leaving main engineering by 2330," he said and made another note.

"And approximately at the same time, Kolrami spots Professor Rosenthal, seemingly heading for main engineering."

Clancy made another note. "The same time he was supposed to be in a meeting with Hopkins and Colcord. We should speak to them and get verification.

Nora stood and tapped her combadge. "Nora to Hopkins."

"*This is Hopkins,*" came her prompt reply.

"Lou, I've got some questions about the murder case, do you have a few minutes?"

The chief engineer hesitated before responding. "*We're in the middle of aligning the main sensor platform for the array. It's not the best time.*"

Nora looked at the counselor but his insistent look made it clear that he thought they shouldn't delay.

"Just a few questions. You don't have to come here. Can you go into your office and talk?"

"Give me a second."

They could hear her excusing herself from her team and walk away. After a moment there was the sound of a door closing. *"Alright, go ahead."*

"We've taken a witness statement that places Professor Rosenthal outside of main engineering at around 2330. But according to previous statements, you, Colcord and Rosenthal were in a meeting until you were called away after Gedar's body was found. Do you remember Rosenthal leaving at any point before?"

"Let me think for a second," she said. *"Yes, you're right. The professor left to get a refreshment at some point shortly after I returned. We decided to have a quick break."*

Clancy could tell Nora was surprised to hear this. Or perhaps slightly irritated that her friend had not shared this before.

"I'm sorry it totally slipped my mind," Hopkins went on, perhaps sensing Nora's frustration by her silence. *"I left the meeting with Jin ... Lieutenant Gedar. We talked for a minute or so then he headed back to main engineering and I returned to the meeting. A short time later Rosenthal left to get a refreshment."*

While Hopkins talked, Clancy scribbled something onto the board. It took Nora a second to find out what he had written: *'Ask her about the argument with Gedar!!!'*

"A few minutes later Colcord stepped out as well."

Nora nearly gasped audibly *"Charlie Colcord left the meeting?"*

"Yes. She was wondering what was taking the professor and went to look for him. Rosenthal returned and after a few minutes so did Colcord and we continued the meeting until ... you know."

The security chief rubbed her forehead after hearing all this for the first time. *"What time did Rosenthal leave the meeting and how long was he gone?"*

"I'm sorry, Laas, I couldn't tell you the exact time. But he was gone for about ten minutes. Colcord for maybe five."

"Okay, think very carefully, what were Rosenthal and Colcord like when they returned? Was there something different about either one? Anything suspicious?"

"My God, do you think that either of them could have ... done this?"

"I don't know yet. What do you remember about their behavior after they came back? Anything out of the ordinary at all?"

She was clearly thinking about it. “Not really. The professor made a joke about the replicator not working properly, or not giving him what he had been after and that that had been the reason he was gone that long. But both of them were pretty focused for the rest of the meeting.”

Nora nodded even though Hopkins wouldn't be able to see it. “Thank you, Lou. I'll contact you again if I have any more questions. Nora out.”

In the meantime Clancy had made more notes to the board.

2330 (estimated): Rosenthal leaves meeting.

2335 (estimated): Colcord leaves meeting.

2340 (estimated): Rosenthal returns to meeting.

2342 (estimated): Colcord returns to meeting.

Next he produced another pen, this one bright red and drew a short line underneath the first, covering roughly ten minutes before the time of death and ten minutes after. The overlap made things pretty obvious.

“Damn it, both of them had plenty of opportunity to go over to main engineering and kill Gedar,” said Nora, looking over the board.

“But according to Hopkins neither of them acted suspicious after returning. Now, I could be wrong but neither Professor Rosenthal nor Ms. Colcord strike me as the stone cold killer type.”

“I don't care,” she said sharply. “They both had opportunity and we know that Colcord had motive.”

“Yes, but let's remember that Rosenthal is actually the one who left first and was gone the longest. And he's the one who was spotted heading for engineering. Problem is he does not have a motive.”

“That we know of,” she said. “We need to bring him in again. Both of them. Something happened while they were gone and I'm not going to let them go until we now exactly what that was.”

- VII -

They spent the walk back to the settlement mostly in silence, both of them preoccupied with their own thoughts.

Deen was mostly mad which she had to admit was not a sensation she was too familiar with. Tenarians tended to be placid and harmonious people after all. There hadn't been a war on her world in a thousand years and crime was virtually non-existent. Tenarians had overcome the need for violence to settle an argument or a conflict long before humans and even before Vulcans and they had achieved this without losing their sense of passion or otherwise hiding their emotions.

Of course serving in Starfleet had changed her perceptions somewhat and violence had become something she had come accustomed to. Since the war had broken out she had partaken in its viciousness herself, had been forced to in order to protect that what she cherished most. Her friends, her colleagues as well as all the citizens of the Federation who depended on Starfleet to keep them safe from unwarranted aggression.

But she had never expected violence from a group of stranded Vulcans, no matter how isolated and disconnected they were from the outside world, here in the middle of a practically impassable nebula. She had never expected one of their own to become a victim of such vial aggression and the fact that it had been Srena who had been attacked made matters even worse.

She had grown quite fond of the young Andorian and her bright-eyed, excitable nature which she had been able to maintain even in the face of fighting a nasty, painful war. Perhaps she saw in the woman a little bit of herself. An innocence she feared she was losing with every passing day.

Deen was mad. She wanted to find who was responsible, she wanted an explanation and most of all she wanted justice.

She glanced over at Xylion but predictably his thoughts were almost impossible to ascertain, judging by his masterfully maintained mien. She suspected that he still harbored doubts that anyone in the settlement could have been responsible for the attack. How could they? After all they were Vulcan, like he was. Dedicated to reason and logic. And where was the logic in attacking a defenseless young woman?

They reached the outskirts of the settlement and the few people they encountered reacted pretty much exactly the way they had the first time they had come here. That is to say, hardly at all. A few furtive glances wandered their way before they returned to their duties, be that working the fields, gathering wood or heading out for another hunt, the arrival of the two armed Starfleet officers was not noteworthy enough for them to interrupt their routine.

Deen was determined that she would get their attention anyway necessary.

They found Volik, the town elder, in discussion with some of his fellow Vulcans close to the town square.

"Volik?" Deen called out as soon as she had spotted the man. It garnered her a sidelong glance from Xylion but she chose to ignore it.

The elder for his part turned towards the newcomers for only a moment before he returned to his discussions with his own people.

It made her only angrier and she picked up the pace. "Volik, we need to talk. Now."

He turned his head once more. "I shall be with you shortly," he said.

She shook her head as she stepped up to him. "Not good enough. Whatever else you are doing will have to wait," she said and unholstered her weapon. The implication wasn't subtle and she didn't care.

He noticed the phaser in her hand, held close to her leg. So did the others who stood with him, a few of the younger men tensing noticeably. "This is most irregular."

"I agree completely."

He glanced at Xylion who had not made any move for his own sidearm. "You have returned, as I knew you would. However, I must question your motives. Members of our community do not threaten each other. It is not logical."

"First of all, let's get one thing straight right away," she said. "We're not members of your little community and we never will be. We've already made that clear to you previously."

But Volik kept his eyes squarely on the other Vulcan. "I believe that remains to be determined. Don't you agree, Commander?"

Xylion raised an eyebrow. "Our loyalty is to Starfleet. This has not changed."

"I see," he said and then looked back at the heated Tenarian and her weapon. "But something else has. There is a reason you have come back here and have taken such an aggressive stance."

"The reason is you," she said. "You and your people came out and attacked Ensign Srena last night. She was beaten viciously and is in a coma. She may not survive. What logical explanation do you have to offer for that, I wonder?"

Like Xylion, Volik was a master at schooling his features and he revealed nothing. "You're colleague's circumstances are unfortunate but our people are not to blame."

"There is nobody else here," she shot back angrily.

"Volik," the science officer said. "It is logical to assume that the assailant is a member of your settlement. How can you be certain that you are not responsible?"

"It is not logical."

"Most Vulcans would also say that it isn't logical to refuse assistance when requested, as your people did when Srena tried to get your help with spare parts. Most Vulcans would agree it is not logical to slaughter animals and consume their meat," Deen said.

"We had to adapt to the situation we have found here."

"What about your idea to have us join your little commune here without so much as asking our opinion first? Is that logical? To simply assume we would want to set up camp here permanently? I'd say somebody in this settlement didn't respond too well to rejection and decided to take matters into their own hands."

The elder Vulcan took his time to speak. "You are making assumptions without a basis on fact, Lieutenant."

"Volik is correct."

Deen aimed Xylion a venomous look. The last thing she wanted now was for him to take his side.

"We cannot be certain of the attacker's motives. However, it stands to reason that whoever is responsible is part of this settlement."

She nodded to accede to his point, trying to calm herself in the process, before focusing on Volik again. "Whoever is responsible needs to face justice. They must be found and incarcerated until they can face a Federation court."

"I understand this to mean that you are still seeking to leave this planet."

Deen looked at him as if he had just grown another head. "Yes, we very much intend to do just that, as soon as repairs are completed. But first we need to find who attacked Ensign Srena and retrieve the thruster control module they removed."

"I will not be able to spare any persons to help you in that endeavor. The harvest season has begun and we must prepare for the impending cold season. Every person in the settlement will have a specific task to complete and little time to do so. However, I am willing to offer our hospitality and care to your wounded crewmember. We have been able to successfully produce a number of remedies from naturally growing ingredients which may help in her recovery."

The operations officer uttered a frustrated sigh and then turned away to look over the settlement. Her eyes settled on the large central building which still resembled the cargo hold and engineering section of the freighter which had brought the Vulcans to this place. "Allow us to salvage what remains of your ship for parts then," she said. "I'm sure we'll find something that we can use to control the runabout's thrusters. After that it'll be a matter of hours until we can get out of here, take you with us and avoid this cold season altogether."

"That will not be possible."

"Why the hells not?" she barked, surprising herself with the fire in her tone.

"Is it not obvious, Lieutenant," said Xylion in the other man's stead. "Volik and his people have no intention on leaving this world."

She gaped at him and then at the town elder.

"Xylion is correct. This is our home now and we do not intend to leave it behind."

The Tenarian reached for her forehead, rubbing her temples in the hopes of staving off a headache. "Fine, I don't care if you stay or go. But we're not staying. Let us have those parts you clearly do not require, find who attacked Srena so we can take him or her back with us and we'll go our separate ways."

"We shall treat any such person in a manner befitting our own ways. And we will not be able to spare any parts from our former vessel."

Deen glanced back at Xylion, unable to believe that she was being rebuffed at every point, pleading with him wordlessly to take charge and get this stubborn Vulcan to relent.

But Xylion refused to do any of that.

For a moment nobody spoke.

Volik remained rooted to the spot, his eyes focused on the tall science officer who stared right back without saying so much as a word. Deen was unable to stand by calmly and took a few steps away only to come right back, the phaser in her hand tapping against her leg. Then she turned to Xylion. "Commander?"

He didn't respond straight away. "Mister Volik has made his intentions clear. He will not assist us any further."

"I have offered any assistance I can," said Volik, "but I cannot put the needs of the many over the needs of the few."

"One of your people attacked and nearly killed another person," Deen nearly shouted at the man. When he showed no visible sign that he had acknowledged her outburst she decided to give up. She holstered her phaser again. "What's the point?" she said, mostly to herself. "Commander, I suggest we return to the runabout and try to find some way to get off this rock without the thruster module, seeing that we will not get any help from these people."

"Agreed."

"One more thing," said Deen and looked Volik square in the eye. "Tell your fellow settlers to stay well clear of the runabout. If I see any of your people within five hundred meters of our vessel, I will have no scruples of opening fire."

"If that is what you wish, it shall be so," he said but looked at Xylion instead.

The commander offered a small nod in response.

"Let's get out of here," she said and turned on her heels to head back towards the runabout.

Xylion lingered for just a moment longer.

"If you reconsider your decision," Volik said, "we will gladly accept you and the rest of your people as part of our community. I know that Tela would very much appreciate if you were to decide to stay," he added and indicated to his daughter who had appeared close to one of the buildings, looking at Xylion from a good two hundred yards away.

"Commander?" Deen called out, clearly growing impatient at having to wait for him to join her.

"That will not possible," he said to Volik.

The older Vulcan raised his hands and offered the Vulcan salute. "Unfortunate but regardless, life long and prosper, Xylion."

Xylion returned the gesture. "You as well, although I wish we had been able to arrive at a more mutually beneficial outcome," he said, shot the young Vulcan woman one last glance and then followed Deen out of the settlement.

- VIII -

Professor Erez Rosenthal and Charlie Colcord had been escorted to the interview rooms by armed security guards but not before the woman had vocally voiced her opinion about this treatment to the officers who had come to engineering to pick them up.

She was still furious when Nora and Clancy entered the interview room.

While Rosenthal remained in his chair, his colleague had been angrily pacing the room, whipping around to face the doors the moment they opened.

“Do you have any idea of the disruptions your causing to the ongoing construction of the sensor array?” she said. “Do you have any notion of the possible damage you will be responsible for if we fail to finish the array within the next few days? Millions of people may depend on the intelligence that this device will be able to gather about Dominion movements. The Federation’s entire war strategy may be at stake here and you single-handedly undermine all of this by having us dragged here by your goons. It is entirely unacceptable and I will make sure Starfleet Command learns of your actions here which are based solely on your desire to harass the professor and me.”

To their credit, neither of the investigators paid the raging woman much mind and instead sat down in their chairs, placed their padds on the desk and considered their content for a moment.

“What do you have to say for yourselves?” she said angrily.

Clancy looked up with a disarming smile. “We understand from Lieutenant Hopkins, that the array is undergoing a process of automatic alignment for the next few hours,” he said. “Apparently your immediate involvement will not be required for that process.”

Colcord was stunned for a moment. She quickly recovered. “So now you’re an engineer? You have no idea what you’re talking about. And neither does Lieutenant Hopkins for that matter. There is still plenty for us to do to ensure the array will work as intended.”

“Charlie,” Rosenthal said softly.

“No, this is not acceptable, Professor,” she shot back, still on her feet, still agitated. “This woman has been trying to find a way to blame me for Jin’s death for days now. And now that she’s desperate, she’s

resorting to strong hand tactics with no regard for the work we are trying to accomplish here."

But Rosenthal was not so easily rattled. "Please, Charlie, take a seat and let's hear what they have to say. They are partially right about the automatic alignment process."

She shook head but did sit down. "We could still fine-tune the fuel cells and run testing simulations on the long-range sensor packages. Much remains to be done."

"If you answer our questions quickly, we'll try to have you out of here in a jiffy," Clancy said with a smile.

It did nothing to calm Colcord.

"You lied to us," said Nora Laas brusquely, making it immediately apparent that she had fallen back into the bad cop mode, a role that seemed to suit the fiery Bajoran quite well.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Colcord said.

"Well, let's not go so far and call it a lie," said Clancy, "so much as a significant omission."

The blonde woman still looked perplexed and on the verge of rising to her feet in protest once more.

Nora focused in on Rosenthal. "You left the meeting with Hopkins early on the day of Gedar's murder."

There was a moment of silence following this damning accusation.

Colcord ensured it didn't drag on too long. "We were both exhausted, especially after the argument we had with her and Gedar."

"About Gedar's involvement in the meeting?" said Nora.

Colcord decided to ignore that point. "The professor needed a short refreshment break and left the room for perhaps a couple of minutes."

"In fact, it was more like ten minutes, according to Lieutenant Hopkins."

The woman uttered a disparaging moan to communicate her feelings regarding the chief engineer. "She got confused."

Nora shook her head. "We don't think so. Also, we have a witness placing you just outside main engineering, Professor. And if you didn't return to the meeting room for ten minutes, it means that you were at the crime scene during the time of Gedar's death."

Colcord jumped back onto her feet. "What you are implying is preposterous."

“We also have evidence to place you in Gedar’s quarters the day before he died,” said Clancy and his laser-like eyes focused on Rosenthal who, to his credit, didn’t flinch at the close scrutiny. “We already established a history between Gedar and Ms. Colcord. One which would lend itself to a motive to want him dead, but there is no obvious connection between you and Gedar. And yet you seemed to have sought him out twice over two days, even after making it clear you had no interest in getting assistance from any of the Starfleet engineers.”

Nora leaned in closer. “What was it Professor? Where you angry that Gedar had hurt Colcord back at the Academy? Where you looking to settle your partner’s score yourself?”

Colcord hesitated for a moment, almost as if suddenly unsure of herself. She looked at the professor who didn’t immediately offer any defense. Her moment of indecision lasted a mere second before she focused on the two investigators again. “You are grasping at straws here. You have nothing to charge any of us other than suspicions and circumstantial evidence. Either charge us right now or let us go.”

Clancy focused back on Colcord, thinking for a moment. “You are pretty young to be a full-fledged partner to one of Starfleet’s preeminent scientist and engineer, wouldn’t you say?”

“What?” she said, almost as if unable to believe his audacity.

“It just occurred to me that the professor here has decades of experience in his field whereas you are fairly new to the scene. In fact there is hardly a single record about any of your work we could find. So naturally I was wondering exactly what you were bringing to this partnership of yours.”

The look on Clancy’s face seemed to be implication enough.

Rosenthal offered a smile. “You have done your research, Counselor but apparently it wasn’t quite thorough enough. I am a happily married man,” he said. “And I’ve been with my husband for over forty years. My relationship with Charlie is strictly professional.”

Clancy nodded to accede the point.

“Why then,” said Nora, “have you decided to enter into this professional partnership?”

“That is none of your — “

But Rosenthal raised his hand to stop her and she slowly took her seat again. “Charlie brought some very important elements to this

project. I can safely say that without her involvement, we wouldn't be in this nebula today."

Clancy referred back to his padd. "It's not the sensor technology, that much seems obvious. I'm admittedly no expert but from what I understand most of it is based on your previous work, Professor."

"The shields," said Nora, making the connection herself.

The counselor nodded and then looked at Colcord. "You are responsible for the shield design."

"I contributed to it, yes," she said.

"And it's a design that Lieutenant Gedar seemed to be quite familiar with. More so than anyone else on this ship. Is it possible he was more familiar with the design than you were?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Really?" said Clancy. "Because you knew Gedar extremely well at the Academy. Attended many of the same classes and probably worked on very similar projects. Then you have a sudden falling out —"

"The bastard cheated on me," she said but with a lot less fire than before.

Clancy nodded. "Right. And you decide to leave the Academy."

Nora was following her colleague's train of thought. "It wasn't your design."

The other woman turned red. "It was as much mine as it was his."

"Maybe that's right," said Clancy. "But it was you who brought it to Professor Rosenthal, not him. And you did so without his knowledge."

"That's why you didn't want to come here," said Nora, realizing the true reason for the first time. "It had nothing to do with your past relationship with him. You didn't want him to find out that you had stolen his designs."

She forcefully hit the table. "I didn't steal anything. We worked on the transphasic shield together. After what he did to me, he had no more claim to it."

Nora grinned. "I'm not sure the courts would agree. Besides, he's no longer around to verify that, is he?"

"I didn't kill Gedar."

Clancy nodded and looked at Rosenthal. "You found out, didn't you?"

Even Colcord now turned to look at the man sitting next to her.

He removed his glasses very slowly and began to polish them with a cloth he kept in the vest of his three-piece suit. "I had suspected something for a while now. Don't misunderstand. Charlie is very efficient and smart as a tack but just not quite smart enough to come up with the transphasic design," he said and then looked at the blank expression on her face. "Sorry, dear, but I suspected for a while now that you didn't come up with this by yourself."

"And your suspicions were confirmed when you met Gedar," said Clancy.

The professor nodded. "He had the kind of inside knowledge on the design that I would not have expected from a Starfleet engineer with no direct involvement with the project. I knew right away after meeting him the first time that he had seen the design before. That he'd had a hand in creating it."

"That's why you went to see him in his quarters the day before he died," said Nora. "You didn't want to share the credit with him, did you? What did you do? Threaten him?"

He quickly shook his head. "Nothing as crude as that. Mister Gedar had a quite peculiar set of priorities one doesn't usually find among Starfleet officers."

"What does that mean?" said the Bajoran.

"He was interested in money. Lots of it. We came to an agreement. I would sell the design to the Ferengi or the Orions and he would receive the majority of the profit."

But Nora was not convinced. "What would he need with money?"

"I'm not sure. But he did mention to me that he was not intending on staying in Starfleet much longer. I don't think he was happy here or maybe he had gotten himself in some other trouble, he wouldn't elaborate on that."

"Presumably you made this arrangement the day before he died," said Clancy. "But then you sought him out again on the day he was killed. Why?"

"Part of our arrangement had been that he kept well clear of getting involved in the sensor array construction. I was naturally concerned when he showed up to the meeting with Hopkins and the insights he offered at the time," said the professor before placing his spectacles back on his nose. "I was concerned that he had changed his mind."

“Did he?” Nora said.

He shook his head. “No. At least he claimed not to when I found him by himself in engineering. He said that he had only joined the meeting at Lieutenant Hopkins’ insistence; that she apparently wanted him to take a bigger role in the project over his objections. I think she thought very highly of him as an engineer, which I suppose is understandable. He told me that he’d had a word with her about it after he had left the meeting and that it became rather heated. But he assured me he would stay away in the future as he still needed the money I could get him. He was still determined to get out of Starfleet as soon as he could. And he was very much alive when I left him.”

Nora and Clancy exchanged looks and it was obvious that the security chief was not yet entirely convinced of this story.

The counselor turned back to face the scientist. “Professor, would you agree to undergo an autonomous response analysis?”

He nodded without hesitation. “Certainly.”

Day Eight: Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy

- I -

Srena moaned quietly and Deen immediately turned away from the console she had been working at and within moments was at the young Andorian's side. The pilot had drifted in and out of consciousness over the last few hours, often mumbling incoherent nonsense which to Deen was a great concern and a sign of a significant traumatic brain injury. Something that had to be treated quickly but which required not only the care of a medical professional – which she was not – but also much more specialized equipment and medication than she had access to on the runabout.

“Lance?” she asked softly.

Deen took her hand, like the rest of her body much of the healthy blue color had drained from it and it was clammy to the touch. “I’m going to get you back to him, I promise you that,” she said and brushed her short white hair. “You just hang in there for me, alright?”

There was no indication that she had understood a word Deen had said.

The Tenarian reached for a medical tricorder, removed the separate scanner and ran it over the injured woman. The results were not encouraging. If anything, her vital signs were getting worse.

Next she found a hypospray, checked its content and injected it into her neck and then watched as the Andorian slowly drifted back to sleep.

With a heavy sigh, Deen stood and left the runabout. She found Leva and Xylion working at the front of the small vessel, where the thruster control module had been.

The tactical officer turned to look at her as she approached. “How is she?”

She shook her head sadly. “Not well. Besides a broken clavicle and numerous broken and cracked ribs, she’s also got a skull fracture, a severe concussion and most concerning of all, an intracranial hemorrhage. And that we can’t treat here. She needs to get back to *Eagle* as soon as possible.”

"I recommend you induce a coma to give Ensign Srena the best chance of survival until we are able to return her to the ship," said Xylion.

"I've done that but her injuries are so severe, her vital signs are still dropping. I don't think it will give us enough time," she said and then looked at the work they had done. "Any progress here?"

"Without the thruster control module we are unlikely to produce enough thrust to be able to lift off," said Xylion.

"We're considering rewiring the impulse engine to give us a boost sufficient to clear the planet's gravity but it was severely damaged in the crash," said Leva.

"Can we repair it?"

"It is possible," the Vulcan said. "However, according to my calculations it will require at least seventy-two hours of labor to manually carry out repairs and configure the impulse engine to allow us to lift-off the runabout."

Deen shook her head. "Srena doesn't have that kind of time."

"We were discussing some shortcuts we could take," the tactical officer offered. "It won't be pretty and its definitely not going to meet safety regs but we might be able to shave off a few hours."

The Tenarian didn't look comforted by this, fully aware that they needed to do far more than gain a few hours. They needed days if they wanted any hope of being able to save Srena.

Leva looked passed her, his eyes narrowing. "What is *she* doing here?"

Deen and Xylion quickly followed his glance to spot somebody approaching the runabout from the direction of the settlement.

"I don't believe it," said Deen and rushed back inside the *Nebuchadrezzar*.

"I thought you had made your feelings regarding any visits clear," said Leva.

"The lieutenant was very specific."

"Looks like it didn't take," the Romulan said as he watched the young Vulcan woman approach the runabout.

Deen came back holding a phaser, clearly intending to make good on the promise she had made to Volik. She would not stand for any of the Vulcans trying to interfere with them again.

“Stay here, Commander,” Xylion said to Leva when he saw Deen moving to head off the approaching Tela.

The tactical officer frowned. “You know, I’m the one with the security background. I think maybe I should –” But Xylion and Deen were already on their way. “Fine, I suppose you two can handle an unarmed young woman by yourselves.”

“You have been warned to stay away,” said Deen as she closed in on their unwelcome visitor, her phaser held at the ready. “You’ve done enough here already.”

The woman was not to be deterred and kept coming.

Deen raised the weapon. “Stay where you are.”

“I must speak to Xylion,” she said and then stopped a good twenty yards away from Deen.

“He’s got nothing to say to you.”

“Lieutenant,” the science officer said as he caught up with her. “I will hear what she has to say.”

The golden-haired operations officer didn’t seem to agree. “Everything has already been said, Commander. We’re just wasting time.”

He regarded the other Vulcan for a moment before turning to face his fellow officer. “We spoke to Volik. It may be possible that other members of the settlement have diverging opinions. We should hear her out.”

“I wish to speak to you in private,” Tela said from where she stood. “Please.”

Deen shook her head. “I don’t like this.”

“Stand down, Lieutenant,” he said and then approached the young woman.

She holstered her phaser. “Vulcans. If there are any more stubborn creatures in the galaxy, I haven’t met them yet,” she said. “I’ll stay right here and keep my eye on her,” she called after him.

“That is acceptable,” Xylion said but kept his focus on Tela. “What have you come to discuss with me?”

But for the moment she seemed more concerned with the armed Deen, watching her with sharp eyes.

Xylion noticed. “You will not be harmed as long as you remain peaceful.”

“I have not come here to hurt anyone.”

He raised an eyebrow. "However some of your people did. They attacked and nearly killed Ensign Srena."

Her facial expression visibly darkened. Then she slowly headed away from the runabout, indicating for Xylion to follow her, clearly not wishing to be overheard by Deen. He did as she asked and they came to a halt by the canyon wall and not too far away from where the Starfleet away team had first encountered the young Vulcan woman.

She turned to face him. "I greatly regret what has happened to your colleague, Xylion, and I wish for nothing more than that it had never happened."

"It is not logical to wish for something that cannot come to pass."

"Our people have been on their own for a very long time and I'm afraid to say that some may have lost their way. Many no longer follow Surak's teachings the way they should. They have lost their grip on logic and I fear that it will destroy our settlement."

"And you believe those individuals are responsible for the attack on the ensign?"

She nodded. "Yes. I would not be able to say who exactly was responsible but I have my suspicions."

"While those responsible should answer for the crime they have committed, our more immediate priority is to return our injured crewmember to our ship where she can receive the medical attention she requires to survive."

"I understand this. That is why I have come, Xylion. I've spoken to my father and he is willing to help you."

The science officer's schooled features only allowed the tiniest hint of his skepticism to show. "He appeared adamant that he was not in a position to do so when we spoke to him before."

"He is concerned. Like me and like many of us are about our colony here falling apart. If logic truly begins to fail us we may be in danger of reverting back to the violent and aggressive ways of our forefathers."

"Interesting," said Xylion with the intrigue of a scientist. "Studying such an anthropological shift among an isolated group of Vulcans could have significant scientific value. However, I find it doubtful that such a considerable behavioral change could take place within the time this colony has existed on this world."

"I don't know, maybe it is something inherent to this place, but Xylion, we're not a science experiment. We need your help to survive."

"What do you suggest?"

Tela glanced back towards the runabout where she could still see Deen, watching her like a hawk. Then she looked him straight in the eye. "You could teach us so much, Xylion. You could ensure that we stay true to Surak's teachings. That we remain true to what it means to be Vulcan," she said and she reached out to gently touch his wrist. "Choose to stay here with us and Volik has agreed to do whatever is in his power to provide you with what your friends require to leave this world."

- II -

The first thing she noticed, as she always did when having stepped onto the bridge over the last few days, was the far too busy and colorful nebula on the large forward facing view screen. While most everyone else on the ship found the sight mesmerizing, to her it was disturbing, more like a feverish, drug-induced nightmare than a spectacle of nature.

More interesting to her was the fact that the sensor array sitting just a few hundred meters from their starboard bow was now practically fully assembled. It wasn't much to look at really, and not too different from most other long-range sensor platforms such as the Argus array for example. It wasn't much more than a collection of large hexagonal pallets merged together to form a single, powerful array, calibrated just right to be able to spy through the nebula and far into Dominion held territory. It really fulfilled much the same function as the Argus array, except that the subspace telescope had been far too exposed and had ultimately become an easy and early target of Dominion forces. This sensor platform on the other hand was hidden deep within the Aphrodite nebula in a place the Dominion was unlikely to suspect and even less likely able to traverse.

Tazla Star had not come to the bridge to inspect the nearly completed sensor array. Instead she turned to the aft stations lining the bridge. She found a number of crewmembers and civilian engineers busy at the engineering and mission ops station, overseeing the construction efforts from here as well as from engineering. Only a single officer occupied the Science I console and it was him she had come to see. She stepped right up to the officer, not wishing to be overheard by the rest of the bridge. "What do you have for me, Lieutenant?"

Lance Stanmore turned and looked up at the first officer. "The computer just finished the analysis of that subspace noise you had me check out."

Intrigued she placed a hand on the back of his chair and another on the console and then leaned in closer. "Were you able to get a positive identification?"

"You mean other than to say that it's nothing more than subspace noise?" the blonde-haired junior lieutenant said and offered a smirk. When he noticed that the Trill was not in a joking mood, he quickly

wiped it off his face. "Uh, no, sir, sorry. However, there are some characteristics here that could possibly hint that this was indeed a deliberate subspace message."

"Show me."

He quickly manipulated the controls and it brought up a severely eroded waveform pattern on the screen. Over eighty percent of it however were completely missing.

Stanmore didn't miss her skeptical eyes. "I'm afraid this was all the computer was able to recover," he said and then pointed at two visible spikes on the screen. "See these patterns here? According to the computer there are roughly sixty-eight known communication patterns that would fit that particular wavelength."

"No way to narrow that down?"

"I'm afraid not," he said. "The computer still believes with a seventy-six percent probability that we're looking at nothing more than random subspace noise here."

The first officer considered that for a second. "Alright, let's assume for a moment we know that this isn't subspace noise. How about we enter those variables into the computer. Tell it to treat it as a communication burst, encrypted and sent out only to mimic subspace noise. What would be the most likely result?"

"One moment," he said and entered Star's hypothesis.

Within a few seconds the display changed to overlay a wide variety of patterns on the existing remnant. Most were quickly dismissed as incompatible. At the end thirty-eight remained as possible matches.

The beta-shift operations officer looked over his shoulder to find Star's sharp gaze focused on the screen. "None of these make any sense," he said.

But the first officer was still thinking. Then she looked him directly in the eye. "On the contrary, Lieutenant, this is exactly what I've been looking for," she said and handed him a padd. "Transfer your findings, please."

"Yes, sir," he said and quickly did as he was told and returned her padd.

Star turned on her heels and headed back towards the turbolift, convinced that she now had in her possession the missing link to turn her theories into hard evidence which would allow her to for once and

for all reveal the spy operating on board and bring his activities to an end.

- III -

“Deck nine.”

The turbolift set in motion the moment Nora Laas had specified their destination. She then turned to look at the man next to her. “Let me do the talking on this one.”

Clancy consider her for a moment. Then he nodded. “I understand.”

“You understand what?”

“I suppose he’s not technically a senior officer but he’s part of the inner circle of the command staff. Part of the family as it were. You’ve worked closely with him over the last few years and therefore you wish to approach this delicately.”

She shook her head. “That’s not it at all.”

“Oh? What then?”

“It’s just that...” she said but then stopped herself. “Listen, I don’t have to justify myself. I’m in charge of this investigation, remember? What was it you called me? Big Meat?”

He chuckled. “Big Cheese.”

“Right. And do me a favor and stop trying to psychoanalyze me.”

He nodded seriously. “Of course, I apologize. Won’t happen again. But I do think you have to be prepared to face the senior officers just like you were when you went after the rest of the crew. Even if they are close colleagues and friends. Otherwise we might never get to the bottom of this.”

“He’s not a suspect,” she said defensively, “we’re just talking to him to verify some of the things that have been said about our victim.”

“He could still be involved. All I’m saying is that sooner or later, you may have to ask tough questions to people you know quite well.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“You don’t have to do it alone. I can be of—”

“I said I’ll handle it,” she said sharply. Then the turbolift came to a halt and the doors parted, allowing Nora to step out.

“I’m sure you will,” he called after her just before he followed the security chief.

They reached their final destination not a moment later.

“One of yours?” Clancy said when he spotted a slender, red-headed young woman guarding the entrance to the quarters they were heading for. She had a phaser strapped to her hip.

Nora rolled her eyes. “I forgot that Star had him restricted to quarters after the incident on the bridge. Didn’t realize she had him under guard as well,” she said, making it clear that she didn’t agree with the decision and perhaps sounding a little annoyed at herself that she had lost track of events on her own ship.

The woman immediately straightened her shoulders when she saw her boss approach. “Sir.”

“At ease, Skyler,” she said.

Petty Officer McIntyre relaxed slightly.

“I take it the lieutenant is safely in his quarters?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the guard said. “As to Commander Star’s orders, he has not left since he has been restricted to quarters.”

“Very well,” said Nora and then stepped up to the doors and activated the annunciator.

The response was almost instantaneous. “Come in,” an excited voice called out.

Nora and Clancy exchanged surprised looks before entering the junior officer’s quarters.

Lif Culsten was coming out of the small, adjacent bedroom to greet his visitors. “Welcome, welcome,” he said. “Please tell me you’re bringing good news. You found who’s behind all this craziness and you’ve come to tell me that I’m a free man once more.”

Clancy smirked at the earless and silver haired Krellonian. “I’m sorry but that’s not us.”

He nodded slowly. “Right, you two are looking into Jin’s murder,” he said, his voice dropping noticeably. “But where are my manners,” he said and pointed at the compact couch. “Please sit. Can I offer you a beverage?”

“We’re good,” said the counselor when he noticed Nora shaking her head. They both sat and Culsten took a nearby chair.

“Regardless of the reason for your visit, I’m thankful you’re here. I’m starting to get a bit stir crazy. Skyler’s good company when she’s on duty but there is only so much we can talk about.”

The security chief clearly didn't like what he had alluded to and shot the junior lieutenant a hard stare. "Petty Officer McIntyre has been in here? As a guest?"

Culsten's eyes grew bigger when he realized what he had said, and more importantly to whom. He noticed Clancy slightly shaking his head.

"Uh ... no, not like that," he said quickly. "She's been the utter professional. Keeping an eye on me like she should."

Nora did not appear to buy that story.

"Lieutenant," Clancy said, quickly making sure to move the conversation back on topic. "We have spoken to a number of witnesses and possible suspects about Gedar and they have revealed a number of things about him we were not previously aware of. We were hoping you could shed some light on those aspects of his life."

He nodded. "Sure, I help where I can but ... uh ... as I told you before we weren't all that close. I wouldn't have said that he was a close friend."

"You did mentioned that you spent some time with him socially," said Nora. "That you helped him acclimate to life in the Federation."

He nodded. "He's been in Starfleet some years now but *Eagle* was his first starship assignment. I suppose it's more difficult on a ship. There is a lot less privacy."

"From what we've heard, that wasn't his problem," said the security chief. "In fact, if anything, he was seeking out companionship perhaps more than he should have."

Culsten nodded. "We talked about that. He had a definite weakness for women. Many of my people tend to get into multiple relationships but usually that urge lessens at his age. But not always and Gedar, even though he tried, couldn't stay away from getting involved."

"Even if he was already with somebody else?" Nora said.

"Yes, even then."

"Do you think he may have been planning on leaving Starfleet altogether? Maybe return to the Star Alliance?" she asked.

He shifted in his seat and didn't make immediate eye contact with the Bajoran. "No, it's nothing he talked to me about."

Before she could ask a follow up question, the door chime rang again.

Culsten looked up. "You expecting somebody else?"

She shook her head.

He got out of his chair and headed for the doors. "Well, the more the merrier, I suppose. Come in."

The doors slid open to reveal the Trill first officer.

"Ah, Commander. I guess now we can officially start the party," he said with a lopsided grin.

The first officer was in no party mood and if her hard features weren't proof enough, the two armed security guards who followed her inside made it undoubtedly clear that this was no social visit.

Nora jumped to her feet. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, Lieutenant," she said, her jaw twitching slightly, clearly not having expected to find the security chief in Culsten's quarters.

Clancy stood also. It didn't take a trained counselor to realize that the tension level in the room had just risen by about a hundred percent. "We're just following up with Lieutenant Culsten, asking him a few questions about Gedar."

Star nodded slowly. "We're here to search his quarters."

"On what grounds?" Nora asked, beating Culsten to it.

"Suspicion of sabotage and espionage."

The pilot shook his head. "I told you before I didn't do it on purpose. I don't know what happened on the bridge."

"Is that so?" said Star and held up a padd. "We have new evidence that links you to at least two possible subspace messages which were secretly sent from *Eagle* a week ago."

"I didn't send any messages."

"How exactly is he connected, Commander?" Nora said.

Star glared at the other woman for a moment before responding. "The messages were sent in a non-Federation lingua code. And Krellonian is a very close match."

"That doesn't prove anything," Nora spat. "Even if those really were subspace messages, anyone could have sent them in a different language to redirect suspicion."

"Sorry, Commander," said Clancy. "But the lieutenant is right. I don't believe it is enough evidence for a search warrant."

The Trill took the opposition in stride. "I'm not looking for a search warrant," she said and then focused in on the Krellonian. "I'm

asking for your permission to search your quarters. If you are as innocent as you claim, you have nothing to hide."

He considered that for a moment, looking towards Clancy and Nora and then back at Star. Then he finally nodded. "Fine, go ahead and search the place. But, Commander, I expect an apology once I'm cleared of all these charges. You'll owe me."

She turned to the security guards she had brought. "Go ahead."

But the two men hesitated, glancing at the fuming security chief. They had quite obviously not expected their immediate superior to be here and their loyalties were clearly to her. It wasn't difficult to tell that she was not pleased what was happening here.

"Gentlemen," Star said sharply. "Get to it."

Ultimately of course, they had no choice. Tazla Star outranked Nora Laas, and they went to work.

"Just be careful, I've got some delicate stuff."

"We won't be damaging anything," Star assured him. "Why don't you take a seat?"

He followed her suggestion reluctantly and after a moment Nora and Clancy followed suit.

Perhaps realizing Culsten was a little on edge from having people go through his things, Clancy focused on the pilot again. "Lieutenant, a few witnesses have told us that Gedar had an interest in acquiring material wealth. Do you have any idea why?"

It took the young man a few seconds before he was satisfied Star and her guards were not completely tossing his place and considered the counselor again. "Material wealth?"

"Money," he clarified. "For most Starfleet officers that's not a priority but Gedar seemed different."

He nodded slowly but didn't speak right away.

Nora noticed and leaned forward. "Lif?"

"We do have a fairly dominant monetary based economy in the Star Alliance," he said. "Wealth is something to strive for among my people. Maybe he was trying to send money to his family."

"But he must have known that it be unlikely he'd have much of a chance doing this when joining Starfleet," said Nora, clearly not convinced by that answer. "If that was truly one of his goals wouldn't he have been better off joining the Nyberrites or maybe even the Ferengi Merchant Navy?"

He shrugged. "I guess he had his heart set on Starfleet. It's not easy to join when you come from a non-Federation world but he went through great lengths to pull it off."

Clancy thought about that for a moment. "If that transmission the commander found was indeed sent in a Krellonian language and you didn't sent it," he said but didn't have to finish the thought.

"Gedar," said Nora. "He's the spy. He sent the transmissions," she added and looked back at the helmsman. "And he was doing it for the money. Somebody was paying him for passing on sensitive information, wasn't he? Either for your people or some other third party. That's why he was looking to leave Starfleet. And a little extra money from Rosenthal's designs would probably set him up quite nicely outside of the Federation."

But Culsten shook his head. "You're ... you're speculating."

"It makes sense."

Star stepped back into the room. "It does, indeed. Except for it doesn't explain any of the things that have happened since he has been killed. Unless you were involved somehow, Lieutenant."

He shook his head.

The Trill was not giving up and stepped closer. "You knew about him, didn't you? You knew that your friend, your fellow Krellonian, was an enemy spy and you didn't tell anybody else about it."

Lif stood and walked to the window, keeping his back to the others in the room.

"I still don't see it," said Nora and stood also. "If Lif was helping Gedar what possible reason could he have had to try and take over the ship or blow up EPS conduits?"

"I don't know but I'm going to find out."

Clancy, back on his feet as well now, took a step towards the Krellonian who refused to face any of his accusers. "You're trying to protect someone, aren't you, Lieutenant? It's obviously not Gedar, he's dead now. Somebody else."

"Another coconspirator," Star said.

"I believe there is a ... a provision in the Federation constitution about not answering certain questions," he said, sounding unsteady and keeping his back to the others.

Clancy nodded. "The Seventh Guarantee."

The helmsman turned. "I'd like to invoke this now."

“You’re not doing yourself any favors doing that, Lif,” Nora said. “It’s only going to incriminate you further.”

He bit his lower lip, clearly frustrated and unsure of himself. “All the same, I think I’d prefer speaking to an attorney before I answer any more questions.”

Star uttered a sigh. “Have it your way, Lieutenant but mark my words, I will get to the bottom of this and if you are involved, which I strongly suspect you are, you will lose your rank and your position. In fact, your career will be over.”

He didn’t say anything to that.

“You’ll remain restricted to quarters for now,” she said, gestured to her security guards who had clearly not turned up anything in the search and left.

When Culsten was not willing to speak with Nora and Clancy about the case any further either, the two of them left as well.

“It’s Hopkins,” Clancy said just after they had stepped into the corridor outside.

Nora threw him a glare, then when realizing that McIntyre guarding Culsten’s quarters was still within earshot, she grabbed his lower arm and dragged him away. “What?”

“It’s got to be her he’s trying to protect.”

“Nonsense.”

“Think about it. Everything points at her. She was Gedar’s superior officer. Not only that but according to a number of witness statements she was particularly fond of him and I suspect they were having an intimate relationship.”

“There is absolutely no basis for that,” she said angrily.

“No? Decaux was convinced that there was another woman and that she was a senior officer. She suspected Wenera but we know that not to be the case. Colcord could see it too. As well as Yunta.”

She shook her head. “Colcord was trying to throw us off her own guilt and Yunta Fey was clearly jealous and hurt.”

“Then there was that argument the night Gedar was killed. Both Kolrami and Sanzenbacher claimed to having seem them having a heated argument,” he said and looked at this padd. “According to him, Kolrami overheard Hopkins accuse Gedar of destroying her career. If Gedar was a spy and she had found out somehow, maybe even covering for him –”

"You're way out of line."

"I don't think I am," he shot back. "Can't you see that you are letting your personal feelings for her cloud your judgment? I've told you, you have to be able to look at everyone objectively and without preconceptions if you are serious about getting to the bottom of this."

"And you've been trying to implicate a senior officer into this from the very first day. What is that about, I wonder? Do you somehow see this as an opportunity to make your career? Get a promotion? You think that if you can pin this on a member of the senior staff, you'll lose the assistant from your title?" she said, her voice no longer able to contain her flaring anger.

Clancy simply stared back at her, for once not having any words to offer in response.

"You know what? You're off this case, Lieutenant."

"What? You can't be serious."

The hard look in her eyes made it clear that she was.

"We're really close to solving this case. Don't do this now."

"It's done," she said and walked away.

"Commander Star is not going to be happy, you know," he called after her.

Of course that had been the wrong thing to say to Nora Laas. "Oh no, what a shame that will be. Why don't you go and complain to your good pal about how unfair the galaxy is? But stay away from my case," she told him without gracing him with another look.

- IV -

Nora Laas entered main engineering and found it significantly less busy than it had been the last time she had visited here. The reason seemed obvious. Despite the disruptions, including of course Lieutenant Gedar's horrific murder, the construction effort was apparently on schedule and in fact nearing completion. For Rosenthal's people as well as *Eagle's* engineering crew, this meant that things were winding down as they focused on the final touches and software calibrations to ensure the spy array would work as advertised and be able to fulfill its purpose of collecting valuable intelligence on their enemy.

The Bajoran still felt somewhat shook up over her argument with the man who until very recently had been her partner in this investigation. She wasn't happy how she had handled it but at the same time she was also convinced that she had done the right thing. Alex Clancy had a tendency of trying to take this case where it didn't belong and she was fed up with it. He simply didn't understand people like Hopkins like she did. That there was simply no way that she could be mixed up in this nasty business. After all, Hopkins was more than a friend to her. They had been roommates at the Academy and ever since she had felt it to be her responsibility to look out for her. Clancy didn't understand that.

Of course she couldn't entirely deny that his assistance had been more helpful than she had expected when she had been initially forced to work with him. But things had progressed quite a bit since then, and she was sure she could take things from here. Especially if he insisted on drawing the wrong conclusions about the people she cared for.

She knew she had to speak to Hopkins regardless of how she felt about her involvement if for no other reason than to put her own mind at rest and to give her friend the heads up that Clancy or Star would potentially confront her over their ridiculous accusations.

The chief engineer wasn't working on the main engineering level and after checking in with Kolrami, he directed her to the upper deck.

She took one of those small, single-person elevators which lifted her to the level directly above. It took her a moment to locate Hopkins. She was working on a computer station in the far corner, away even from the much reduced hustle and bustle of main engineering.

“Lou?”

Whatever the sandy-blonde engineer was working on, it held her entire focus without exception. She didn't give a single outward sign that she had heard Nora.

Undeterred, she stepped up to her friend. “Busy?”

Still no response. Instead her fingers continued to race across her work station at a near frantic pace, her eyes practically glued to the monitors. Nora, lacking an engineering background, couldn't make out what the other woman was working on.

“Lou, hey?”

But the chief engineer continued to treat her as if she was air.

Nora turned to look around to see if anybody else was nearby to bear witness to the Hopkins' odd behavior but found that they were alone. When she looked back at her friend she noticed the sweat pearls forming on her forehead. She reached out for her shoulder, squeezing it. “Louise!”

The woman stopped suddenly, gasped for air and then turned to see the Bajoran, her eyes wide as if seeing her for the first time. “Laas?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Hopkins wiped the sweat off her brow with her uniform sleeve.

“Are you alright?”

She nodded slowly. “Yes, I think so.”

“Didn't look like it,” said Nora, sounding noticeably concerned. “You were completely zoned out there. What are you working on?”

The engineer looked unsure of herself and glanced back at the screen. “I ... I was running a level two warp core diagnostic.”

Nora looked skeptical. “That must have been the most intense diagnostic I've ever seen.”

She uttered a little sigh and cleared the screen. “I guess I've been a little stressed out lately with everything that's been going on.”

“Are you sure that's all? You look pretty pale. Maybe you should pay sickbay a visit.”

She shook her head. “No, I'm alright. What brings you here?”

The security chief continued to consider her for a moment but then seemed to decide that she was no worse for wear, her odd behavior a minute ago notwithstanding. She offered her friend a serious look. “We need to talk. About Gedar.”

A dark look crossed Hopkins' features and Nora instantly understood that she was not yet over Gedar's death. She couldn't blame her. As the chief of security she had lost people under her command, not as many as on some other ships, thankfully, but more than she cared to admit. And even then she had never lost anyone in such a senseless manner.

She nodded slowly. "What do you want to know?"
"Not here. Let's go to your office."

The young engineer hesitated for a moment, as if she feared the notion of having to face her friend over the issue within the privacy of her own office. But before Nora could prompt her again, she set out to lead the way.

The room was fairly small and spartan. Enough space for a desk and three chairs. A few pictures hung on the wall, Nora recognized them as the same she had kept in their Academy room all those years ago, including one of her hometown of Ottawa on the North American continent on Earth.

Hopkins walked behind her desk and took a seat.

Nora remained standing. She decided against beating around the bush. "There are some on this ship who believe that you were involved with Jin Gedar and I want to put those speculations to rest for once and for all. Tell me it's nonsense."

But she refused to make eye contact and didn't respond.

The silence dragged on for too long. Nora covered her eyes with her hand and then turned her back on her friend. "By the Prophets, it's true."

When she still didn't say anything, Nora continued. "Why, Lou? You must have known what kind of guy he was," she said and faced her again.

She nodded gingerly. "I knew that it was never going to be anything serious. And I knew it was wrong to get involved with somebody under my command but for a while there, it just felt so right and I didn't want it to end," she said, her voice small and obviously guilt-ridden. "I thought that maybe I could have what you had. I mean, you were so happy then and everybody could see it," she added, sounding defeated. "Maybe I wanted a bit of that happiness even if it wasn't going to last."

The Bajoran let herself fall into one of the chairs facing the desk. It had never occurred to her that her friend had been looking for a relationship similar to the one she had shared with Eugene Edison. She knew of course of her attraction to their ultra-pragmatic Vulcan science officer but that had always seemed to her more like a schoolgirl crush, an improbable fantasy, considering that Xylion was unlikely to ever reciprocate those feelings. So when she had not been able to make him see her the way she wanted to be seen, she had found a much more willing partner in the outgoing Krellonian. Nora couldn't deny that she felt ashamed at having judged her so quickly. Not to mention the pain at realizing how much she still missed Edison, the man she had loved without compromise.

"I'm sorry," said Nora. "It wasn't my place to judge."

"But you're right about Gedar. I can't say that we didn't have fun, that I even cared for him but I also quickly learned that he wasn't exactly a one-woman kind of man," she said but with no bitterness or anger in her voice. "He didn't deserve this fate."

Nora nodded and stood. "Okay, being involved with a junior officer isn't a crime. But it now appears Gedar may have been leaking classified information."

"What does that matter now?" she said. "He's dead."

"Lou, this isn't just going to go away. Culsten already all but admitted it by refusing to answer any more questions on the subject. He is protecting somebody and it isn't himself or Gedar. He's protecting you and it's only a matter of time until Clancy or Star—" she stopped herself when she spotted the very same having just entered engineering and after a moment's delay making a beeline for Hopkins' office. "Damn, just what I needed," she said and turned back to Hopkins. "Listen, just stay quiet and let me do the talking."

"Laas."

But then the doors parted to allow the first officer to enter, quickly crowding the small office. "Lieutenant Nora, why am I not surprised finding you here?"

"I don't need your permission to visit a friend."

Star nodded. "Yes, of course. You two go back, don't you? If I remember correctly it was you who recommended Lieutenant Hopkins to the captain for chief engineer when you first came aboard."

Nora frowned at that. Star had to have been looking fairly deep into the official records to dig out that little fact. "I take it your little bird came flying back to its coop to chirp."

Star shot the security chief a blank look. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Lieutenant." Her confusion appeared genuine enough.

"I came to speak to Lieutenant Hopkins about Gedar."

"Clancy talked to you."

"I haven't seen or heard from Lieutenant Clancy since earlier in Culsten's quarters," she said firmly. "Now, would you mind giving us a minute?" It hadn't really been phrased as a question.

Nora took a seat instead. "Whatever you need to discuss with Lieutenant Hopkins, you can do it with me in the room. Besides, if this is related to *my* murder victim I should be here anyway."

The two women shot lasers at each other.

"I'd really rather have this conversation in private. Do you need me to make this an order?"

The Bajoran smirked. "You can try. You might want to call in some of my men, seeing that you are already so well acquainted with them, and see if you can get them to drag me out of here because that's what'll take."

"Laas, please," Hopkins begged, clearly not wanting to escalate this any further.

"Don't test me, Lieutenant," Star said, her voice taking on an even sharper edge.

Before the security chief could come back with yet another retort, Hopkins beat her to the punch. "Gedar was the spy. He was a spy and I knew about it."

The two women whipped their heads around to look at the chief engineer who had suddenly risen from her chair.

"Lou, you can't—"

But Hopkins stopped her with a hand. "No, Laas. There is no more point in denying it," she said and let herself fall back in her chair. "In fact, I'm relieved to have it in the open at last. Bad enough that Gedar was killed and that Lif got dragged into all of this for no other reason than being a good friend to me. This is all my fault and I can't stand keeping quiet about it any longer."

It took a moment for the confession to sink in. Then Star addressed the *mugato* in the room. "Did you kill Gedar?"

She shook her head decidedly. "No."

"You do realize however that this makes you a suspect."

"I believe her," said Nora.

Star shot the security chief a less than surprised look.

"Even if she had motive, she didn't have opportunity. She has an alibi for the time of death. She was in a meeting with Professor Rosenthal and Charlie Colcord. We know that Rosenthal saw Gedar alive and then returned to the meeting room. Louise would not have had time to kill Gedar," she said but conveniently leaving out the small yet pertinent detail that Hopkins had been left alone in the meeting room for a short time, even if it had been barely enough time to commit a murder.

"It doesn't mean she wasn't involved," said Star and continued before either could protest, focusing on the engineer. "And even if you aren't, you suppressed knowledge of a spy operating on board. At the very least that is aiding and abetting and at worst, conspiracy and treason."

"Now wait just a minute," Nora protested.

But Louise already nodded. "She's right. On all accounts." When nobody spoke up straight away, she continued. "I found out about a week ago when I traced a subspace message made to look like background noise to a work station he had used. I confronted him about it, not expecting anything malicious at first. But the more I talked to him, the more evasive he became until he finally came clean and admitted that he had been sending engine specifications to the Orion Syndicate. He said he had been approached by them just a few months ago. Apparently targeting Starfleet officers from non-Federation member worlds is their modus operandi and they were able to recruit him by offering him significant financial compensation. He said he was pretty conflicted about it but that his family back home needed the money."

Star shook her head. "That doesn't excuse it. And you should have reported this straight away."

"Yes, I know. But for all he had done, I just couldn't go through with it. I didn't want him to spend the rest of his life in the stockade. We came to an agreement. He'd sever his ties with the Orions and as soon

as our latest mission was over he would either resign his commission or desert if they wouldn't let him."

"And you believed him?" said the commander, suspicion written all over her face.

Nora jumped in. "It makes sense. He'd already hinted at leaving Starfleet. He even arranged with Rosenthal to be paid for selling his transphasic shield design, presumably to have enough money to escape to a place outside the Federation or perhaps even to go back home."

Just then Sirna Kolrami appeared by the doors to the office. "Chief, sorry to disturb you but we've got a problem with the starboard main power tap. Looks bad."

Star responded in the chief engineer's stead. "We're in the middle of something here, can you not look into this?"

The Zakdorn hesitated for a moment. "I suppose. But I really think the chief should have a look. This could get ugly."

Hopkins didn't make a move and looked at the first officer instead.

After a moment's consideration, she nodded. "Alright, go. But do not leave main engineering."

"Yes, sir," she said, got out of her chair and followed her engineer.

Star began to head out as well.

"Commander."

The Trill turned to find Nora Laas now standing and facing her. "What do you intend to do about all this?"

"My duty," she said. "I'm inclined to believe that she was not involved in Gedar's death but her crimes of covering up his activities are just as serious."

Nora nodded, unable to disagree with that statement. "It could destroy her career. As well as Culsten's if he knew about it as well."

"Most likely."

She took a step closer. "We can't afford losing people like them while we're fighting the Dominion with tooth and nail."

"So what do you expect me to do, Lieutenant? Simply ignore all this?"

"Gedar was the spy. The truly guilty party here is dead. He won't be sharing any more secrets," she said. "What's the point in dragging good people like Louise and Culsten down with him?"

"The point, Lieutenant, is the principle," said the Trill and took a step towards the security chief. "Your friend may have forgotten, but as Starfleet officers it is our duty to oppose all enemies. Foreign or domestic."

The Bajoran paced the small office. "There has to be punishment, I agree," she said and then stopped and faced the other woman again. "Charge them both with obstructing an official investigation or failure to follow orders. Something that can be negotiated down to a formal reprimand instead of a court martial."

"That would not be punishment befitting the crime."

"It would keep them from being promoted for a good while. Their careers would be stalled but they wouldn't be over."

The look in Star's eyes remained ice cold.

Nora realized that she was not being swayed. She took a deep breath. "I'm asking you, please, to consider it. I know we haven't exactly seen eye-to-eye on things since you've come aboard but you must agree that losing Louise and Culsten now would be seriously hindering our effectiveness against the Dominion."

A smile began to grow on Star's face. "Not seen things eye-to-eye? Let's call a spade a spade, Lieutenant. You've opposed me being here every chance you've had. Not five minutes ago you were treading dangerously close to insubordination and that's hardly been the first time we've had this little dance of ours."

The security chief looked visibly deflated and Star was clearly enjoying seeing the usually tough as nails Bajoran who never passed on a chance to openly disagree or otherwise oppose her backed into a corner as she desperately tried to find a way to save her friend from losing her commission or worse even, be sentenced to a long, involuntary stay at the Starfleet stockade.

Nora raised her hands in defeat. "Tell me what you want, Commander."

That smirk grew a little wider. "You really think it works that way? You offering me something in order to overlook a severe crime committed on this ship? There is a word for what you're trying to do, Lieutenant."

"Call it what you want," she said, "but I'm still offering. You want my resignation? You'll have it. You want me to transfer off this ship? I'll put in the papers today."

The smile faded from Star's face. "Why I had no idea you could be so loyal."

"I'm not surprised that you can't see the value of loyalty."

"Ah, there it is, the Nora Laas I know, with all the spite and anger I've come to cherish."

Nora blanched. "I'm sorry, I was out of line."

"Now that's something I haven't heard you say before."

Nora nodded. "Alright then. You want me to be a good little officer and say 'yes, sir' and 'with pleasure, sir' whenever you open your mouth? I can do that. You want my unquestioned loyalty. I can do that, too."

She shook her head. "I don't want you to grovel, Lieutenant. What I want—no, what I deserve—is your respect. I want you to start following my orders like you'd follow orders from any superior officer. I want you to stop questioning everything I say or oppose me just because you have a problem with me being your first officer. In short, Lieutenant, I want you to behave like a Starfleet officer is expected to behave."

The security chief considered that for only a few seconds and then nodded firmly. "You are right. My personal feelings aside, you are my superior on this ship and as such you deserve my full compliance. I'm sorry if you didn't have it before."

"You're saying this because you want to save your friend."

Nora stood a little bit straighter. "I'm saying it because it's the truth, sir. Whatever you decide to do with Louise and Culsten, I will follow your orders as if they came straight from the captain."

Tazla Star considered the lieutenant for a moment, as if enjoying her deference, the first time since she had come aboard that she had truly given it. Then she nodded. "I'll figure out how to deal with them without either having to face a court martial. I've been through it and I wouldn't wish that experience on anyone else."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't think I'm doing this solely so you finally treat me like a humanoid being, I'm not that desperate. I don't want to lose good people. Not Hopkins, not Culsten and not you."

She nodded sharply.

They exchanged a last look and an unspoken understanding passed between the two women. Then Star turned towards the doors again.

“Commander, if I ever disagree with an order you give—”

She looked over her shoulder. “I expect you to voice it, just like you would with the captain or another superior. But once I make a decision, it’s final.”

Nora Laas nodded her agreement.

Then the alarm klaxons came to life and the ship shook hard. Nora lost her footing and stumbled forward. Star kept her balance somehow and caught the lieutenant before she could be painfully introduced to the deck plating.

“What’s going on?” Nora asked when she had found her footing again.

But Star was already rushing out of the office, the security chief close behind.

Star and Nora stepped into chaos when they returned to main engineering.

People were hurriedly running back and forth between computer work stations and judging by their panicked expressions, they appeared to be mostly clueless as to what exactly had happened to get them to this point, or worse didn't have the first idea how to stop it.

That something was terribly wrong was not difficult to determine. The ship was still at red alert and while *Eagle* had not shook again, the initial tremble had been bad enough for most to realize that something very much out of the ordinary had transpired.

"What's going on?" the first officer said immediately, focusing in on the chief engineer who looked just about as concerned as the rest of her people.

She did not stop or look up from the station she was frantically working on as she spoke. "We're not sure yet. It looks like the starboard main power tap leading to the nacelle experienced a malfunction."

"What kind of malfunction?" Star said.

But Hopkins was already addressing her own engineers. "Sirna, try to reroute EPS main flow to secondary outlets. Cor, find out what happened to the emergency shut-off. It should have kicked in by now."

The two men acknowledged with a nod but didn't take the time to respond verbally, fully aware that time had become a critical commodity.

The chief engineer shook her head. "It looks like an overload in progress," she said and then actually looked up. "This is bad. Very bad. It could lead to a catastrophic feedback surge right into the main chamber," she added and momentarily glanced towards the back of the room.

Star followed her glance to see the bulky warp core intermix chamber in which the dilithium crystal produced the incredible power necessary for the warp drive and most other ship's systems by being bombarded by deuterium from above and anti-matter from below. The explosive mixture was turned into raw power which was then channeled directly into the two large warp nacelles which hung underneath the ship via highly-charged electro-plasma. But something

had clearly gone wrong and now that very same plasma supposed to provide power to the ship was threatening to tear apart the warp core chamber which would ultimately lead to the destruction of the entire ship.

"Is this the same thing that happened a few days ago?" said Nora, doing her best to stay to one side and out of the way of the engineers desperately trying to avoid a catastrophe.

Hopkins nodded. "Similar but on a much larger scale. If we cannot stop this quickly... damn," she said and hit the table-like master control console with frustration as she worked on it. "I cannot vent the excessive plasma build up. The radiation level must have melted the vents shut."

"Unable to reroute the plasma flow," shouted the Zakdorn from halfway across engineering and working from a different console. "The valves are not responding."

"Yeah, same problem I've got here," said Hopkins and then turned to look the other way. "Cor, where is my emergency shut-off?"

The other engineer was shaking his head. "It's been ... I don't understand, it's not coming on."

Louise Hopkins' eyes grew wider. "What? Why the hell not?" she said and headed towards Cormac Wibberly as he unsuccessfully attempted to activate the one thing designed to save the ship in this circumstance. She nearly shoved him aside to have a look herself.

"Critical overload in two minutes, thirty-eight seconds," said Chief Petty Officer Telrik, the Vulcan able to keep his voice free of any emotional response to the impending disaster.

"Can we eject the core?" asked Kolrami.

Wibberly shook his head. "Not inside the nebula. The thermionic radiation would cause a premature detonation we would not survive," he said as he watched his boss working on the shut-off valve problem he had been unable to solve.

"It almost looks as if it's programming has been overridden," said the chief, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice. "I don't understand this at all."

"It's sabotage, then," said the first officer.

Nora shook her head. "How is that possible? We identified the spy already."

"We've known that there must be accomplices who've been sabotaging the ship since we arrived in the nebula. Clearly this is their work," said Star.

"There are very few people on board who have the engineering knowledge, not to mention the authorization level to reprogram the main shut-off valve," said the chief, still hard at work at trying to undo the damage, her fingers in constant motion.

"How many?"

"All due respect, Commander," said Hopkins without looking up. "I think we need to focus on averting the ship being blown to dust before we can start wondering who's to blame."

"Agreed. Can you reset the valve?"

She nodded. "Yes but it will take time. Time we don't have."

"Sir, we appear to have access to one of the secondary valves on deck twenty-six," said Telrik.

But Kolrami was already shaking his head when he reviewed what the CPO had found. "Not good enough," he said. "The valve is stuck halfway. At this rate it will not divert enough plasma to avoid the overload and we cannot control it from here."

The Trill first officer stepped closer. "The secondary valves have manual overrides, don't they? Accessible via Jeffries tubes."

Kolrami nodded. "Yes but it's pointless. The radiation in those tubes is way above tolerances by now. Nobody would survive that."

Star considered that for a moment. Then she abruptly turned and headed for the nearest turbolift.

"Commander, where do you think you're going?" Hopkins called after her.

"I'm going to go and buy you that time you need," she said without losing her stride.

"I can't let you do that," she said, sounding surprisingly firm, once again showing off her surprising resolve once she was in her element. "You'd be killed."

Star stopped for a second. "Somebody has to do it."

The security chief smirked. "Planning on going out a martyr, Commander?"

"Trust me, Lieutenant, I have no intention on sacrificing myself just yet."

But Hopkins was not buying it. "If anyone should go, it's me," she said and to her credit apparently not even thinking twice about giving her life to save her ship and crew. "I'm the chief engineer, this is my responsibility," she added and was already making steps to head in the direction which would spell her certain doom.

"As you were, Chief," Star said sharply. "It has to be me. Besides, I need you to reprogram the shut-off valve, you're the only one who can to do that in the time we have."

Hopkins stopped in her tracks when her logic began to sink in.

Then Star was gone.

Hopkins and Nora exchanged looks.

"I hate when she goes and tries to play the hero," said the Bajoran.

* * *

Even though her destination was two decks below, Star didn't bother heading for the turbolift. Instead she headed for the nearest Jeffries tube access point, practically ripped away the hatch cover and jumped inside.

She had never been more grateful that she had spent all those sleepless nights since coming onboard *Eagle* to carefully study every last blueprint and technical diagram available, practically becoming an expert on the layout of the majority of all systems, including the secondary valves on deck twenty-six.

She moved as fast as she could on her hands and knees and after a few moments she reached the intersecting hub which allowed her access to the below decks. She found the ladder, opened up the hatches with a tap of a control panel and then slid all the way down.

The heat was the first thing she felt. It was far higher than comfortable levels but the EPS tabs were fairly well insulated so it wasn't nearly as bad as what she had felt a few days ago when she had run into a room with a raging plasma fire. She already knew that it was the radiation that was going to be a far greater concern this time. Thankfully she had a small edge which she hoped would make all the difference as she crawled closer to her destination.

It didn't stop her from feeling light-headed almost immediately or the sickness beginning to grow in her stomach.

"Owens to Star."

Still on the move, she tapped her combadge. "Go ahead, sir."

"Hopkins has just filled me in on what's happening. I want you to get out of there now and leave this to people with appropriate protective gear."

"I'm not sure what Hopkins has told you, sir, but we don't have the time for that. The EPS feedback will destabilize the warp core and destroy containment in less than two minutes. She'll need more time than that to get the shut-off valve engaged again and this is the only way to do it. How soon can you get somebody else in here?"

Owens hesitated. *"Not soon enough."*

"Like it or not," she said as she crawled around a bend and suddenly feeling the overwhelming urge to vomit. "I'm the best chance we've got right now."

"How close are you?"

"I'm here," she said and stopped to remove another cover. However she quickly realized that the crawl space was too restrictive to get a hand on the equipment she needed to manipulate. And the throbbing pain right behind her forehead didn't help matters. She flopped over onto her back with the hatch directly above her now. This allowed her a little more room to work. Of course the hatch cover refused to come off easily. "How much time do we have?"

"One minute, forty-eight seconds until containment failure."

She nodded and then tried the cover again, putting all her strength into pulling down onto the handles. It didn't come free until her third attempt. She unceremoniously dumped the cover and then studied the controls which had been revealed. A lot of them didn't appear to be functioning, most likely destroyed or disabled by the far too hot and irregular EPS flow in the manifold just beyond it. "Never an easy day," she said as she began to work on the few controls which still accepted input.

"How does it look?"

"Well, I'm no engineer but in my expert opinion this is thoroughly FUBAR."

"Anything you can do?"

"I would hate having come all the way out here for nothing," she said and had to wipe the sweat off her brow as it was threatening to

drop into her eyes. Then she reached for one of the controls regulating the valve currently flashing in bright red to indicate imminent danger. She howled in pain upon contact.

"Commander? Are you alright," said Owens, genuine concern lining his words.

She retracted her burned fingers. "Hot, is all," she said and then continued with a more careful approach, gingerly testing any control and surface before trying to work it properly. After a few moments she managed to turn about two out of the twelve bright red lights to green, indicating that she was making some sort of progress.

"I'm looking at the engineering station," Owens said from the bridge. *"Whatever you're doing, it's working. EPS pressure has reduced by about five percent. Hopkins says she needs another couple of minutes. Right now the computer estimates containment failure in sixty-eight seconds. Try to further reduce the pressure."*

"Sounds so easy when you're saying it," she mumbled and reached out again. Even though she had been more careful her fingers were burning and every touch send shockwaves of pain through her digits and up her arms. She gagged as she felt her bile coming up her throat but managed to suppress it, fully aware that she might drown on her own vomit while lying on her back. She managed to get half the lights to green.

"Well done," he said. *"We just need a little more time."*

But Star shook her head. "That's all I can do, the other controls are not responding anymore."

"According to the diagram we're looking at here, there should be a manual release lever to the right. If you can get to it, it should redirect enough plasma to significantly reduce the pressure."

Star saw it. The problem was that it was too far up to reach from her current position. She tried to pull up slightly but immediately realized that it wasn't going to be possible. Her entire upper body protested with intense pain at any movement and it was an effort just to keep her arms up. "I ... I don't think I can."

"Warning, warp core containment failure imminent," the computer announced with its infuriatingly calm voice.

"Tell me something I don't know," she said and surprised herself with how weak her own voice sounded all of a sudden. She felt pain just trying to talk.

"Commander," Owens said, "we've been here before, remember?"

She uttered a little laugh. "You mean ... me trying to save the day in a ... totally absurd and ... irresponsible fashion," she said, vividly remembering her unorthodox method of trying to stop a bomb from detonating over a major city a few months ago which involved jumping out of an airplane without a parachute.

"It's beginning to become your MO," he said. "And I'm not sure I much care for it."

"Right there with you, Captain."

There was a moment of silence. Silence except for the drowning sound of her throbbing head coming closer and closer to explode.

"I need you to focus and get this done."

She took a deep breath and reached out again. But as much as she tried her fingers couldn't get to the lever, falling short by less than an inch. As much as she tried to, her upper body wouldn't move any further. "I'm trying. I really am."

"I'm not going to lose you or this ship, do you hear me?" he said, his voice now taking on a hard edge as if he wouldn't accept failure. "I rolled the dice on you. Taking a chance when I didn't have to. You are not going to let me down now."

She gritted her teeth and she stretched her hands further. "All you've done ... since I've come aboard ... is keep me in check ... on the short leash. All ... respect ... you haven't taken much of a chance ... on anything," she said and could actually feel her fingertips brushing against the surface of the lever. Just not enough to move it.

"You're probably right."

"Probably?" she said, her chest burning with each word. "I ... haven't been a first officer on this ship ... I've been a glorified ... a glorified secretary. If that's ... all you need ... all you want from me ... I'll take it," she said, having somehow managed to touch the handle of the lever but with no leverage whatsoever to move it. "It's better than the alternative. But ... at least be straight ... with me. Tell me that's what you ... what you want. I think I deserve that much."

"No," he said sternly. "I want you to be more than that, Taz. I want you to be my first officer," he added. "And I want to have a ship left for you to be one on."

Despite herself, a smile crept onto her lips. "That ... must have been the first time you've ... you've called me ... that." But she couldn't

keep her hand up any longer and it dropped back down as she uttered a gasp.

"Ten seconds," Owens said.

"The hell with it," she said. "I'm not going ... out like this. Not now." She craned her head to look further up the Jeffries tube and spotted a couple of handholds at either side. With herculean effort she managed to extend both her arms again to hold on to each and drag her radiation wrecked body along the tube for a foot or two. Then she focused back on that elusive lever above.

She took another breath even though her stomach content was once again threatening to spill out along with her used up air and then managed to bring up a leg and smash her boot against the lever.

It bulged slightly.

"Move, you gods-forsaken piece of junk," she yelled with frustration as she hit it again. "Move!"

She hit it a third time and the lever turned.

All the lights changed to green.

It was the last thing she saw.

- VI -

She took a deep breath, knowing that she needed all her strength and courage for what she was about to do. Of course nobody could have ever accused Nora Laas of being in lack of either. And yet the challenge she now faced was much more frightening than even the prospect of meeting the Cardassians or the Jem'Hadar on the battlefield. No, this was something much tougher than going into battle.

"This is ridiculous," she mumbled to herself after realizing that she had stood in front of those doors for at least a full minute. Then she activated the annunciator. And almost immediately she wished for nothing more than being able to undo that one simple action.

Too late. The doors parted and Alex Clancy stood in the doorway of his quarters. He was wearing a civilian shirt with his uniform pants and considering the late hour this wasn't all that surprising. It did help remind Nora how inappropriate her coming here at this time really was.

"Lieutenant?" he said, unable to keep the surprise out of his voice.

"It's late, sorry, I shouldn't have come and bother you. It's just that I was passing by here anyway and I thought that maybe..." she stopped herself, cringing at the sound of her own words and hoped they didn't come across as awkward to him as they sounded to her.

He quickly shook his head. "No bother at all, Lieutenant. Please come in," he said and stepped aside to let her enter.

She debated the wisdom of stepping into his quarters for just about a split second. Ultimately she decided she'd rather be inside than do what she had come here to do in the corridor where any passer by could overhear.

She quickly slipped into his quarters.

They were not what she had expected. The light levels had been dimmed but that couldn't hide the elaborately decorated lounge featuring numerous little statuettes of dragons and lions as well as stone figures of bearded men in what appeared to be monk-like robes. There was a noticeable smell of incense in the room and it didn't take her long to discover a number of still glowing sticks which were releasing the aromatic fragrance in little wafts of smoke.

She had no doubt that most of what she saw had some sort of religious significance. "I'm disturbing you," she said and turned to face him.

"Nonsense. I was just finishing up here anyway," he said and walked over to something that looked like an altar, adorned with a number of figurines and then began to put out the glowing incense sticks.

Nora found herself fascinated by all the decorations. She noticed an especially prominent symbol hanging on the far wall. She had seen it before but could not immediately place it. A circle half white and half black, with a black dot on white background at the top and a white dot on a black background at the bottom.

"This has a religious meaning, doesn't it?"

"Among other things. The ying-yang is a concept embraced by a number of lifestyles and philosophies on Earth. At its core it's a symbol of how opposite forces are interconnected to each other while also remaining independent."

She nodded slowly. "But all this seems like it is more than a lifestyle for you. It feels more ... spiritual."

"It better. I'm a Taoist."

Her eyes opened wide. "You are religious?"

"Why is that hard to believe?"

"I just always thought humans were not particularly spiritual people."

"I suppose most aren't."

Nora walked around the room, carefully studying the many small and intricate statuettes decorating the room. "So what is it you believe in? Some sort of higher being or deity?"

"The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the Eternal Name."

She turned to aim him a quizzical look.

He shrugged. "It's difficult to explain. We do believe in a force that is responsible for everything. But it is beyond description. It can not be expressed in words," he said but when he noticed that it did little to help her comprehend, he added: "Those who follow the Tao, the Way, live their lives according to the Three Treasures. Compassion, moderation and humility."

Nora nodded and turned back towards the ying-yang symbol on the wall. She considered it for a moment before she spoke. "I've never been very spiritual myself," she said. "Which I suppose is odd considering the role it played for us during the Occupation. Many believe that we would never have fought off the Cardassians without our faith in the Prophets. I liked to think it was our actions and shedding our blood which forced the Cardassians to leave, not the belief in some sort of intangible concept."

"But the Prophets didn't turn out to be quite that intangible. They truly exist within the Bajoran wormhole. The Celestial Temple, you call it?"

"Yes," she said and then turned. "And I can't help feel as if I may have betrayed the Prophets. I can't help think that the bad things that have happen to me, to those closest to me, that somehow I'm responsible."

"Because you refused to believe?"

She nodded.

"Spirituality is a tricky thing. It's all about your emotional connection and your own feelings towards you faith. I can't tell you if you are right or wrong about the way you feel about this because at the end of the day, those are your feelings and only you can truly make sense of them."

She offered a weak smile. "Is that you professional opinion, Counselor?"

"You want a professional opinion? Stop punishing yourself for what is passed. Move forward with your life and try to make a difference where you can. Maybe spirituality is your answer, maybe not, all you can do is try."

"Perhaps you're right," she said but then quickly shook her head as if to shake loose those thoughts. "But I didn't come here to talk about spirituality."

"I had guessed that much."

"I came here to say that you were ... well that I spoke to Louise and that perhaps you were not entirely mistaken," she said, clearly finding it difficult to get those words over her lips.

He smirked. "Apology accepted."

Nora glared at him but only for a moment until her features softened again.

Clancy walked over to a table and poured two cups of tea. He offered her one before taking the other.

She accepted the cup and took a sip.

"What did you learn?"

"She was involved," she said after a heavy sigh. "She didn't kill him but she was involved with him. And she knew something about him. Something bad that she should have told somebody. But she and Culsten kept it a secret and now it may endanger their careers in Starfleet."

"I'm not going to pry as to what that was. But I do have a good idea," he said. "Are you concerned about Hopkins and Culsten being court martialed over this?"

"Yes. No," she said, sounding frustrated. "I was. Star agreed to try and mitigate the charges so it won't come to that. But at a price," she added and put down the cup again, her composure slipping now after recalling the deal she had made with their first officer. "Damn it, Alex, she was ready to throw the book at them. I had no choice."

"What did you do?"

She turned towards the window. "I agreed to play nice with her. I agreed to accept her as our first officer."

A small smile formed on his lips. "I don't know about you but that sounds like a small price to pay considering it's what she has every right to expect from you."

"That's what makes this all so damn frustrating," she said, still unwilling to face him. "And now, if she decides to take away this investigation from me, I will have no choice but to let her."

"Then we just have to crack the case before it comes to that," he said and walked over to his desk.

She followed him, quickly finding it just about as much in disarray as her own, with pads filled with reports littered all over and giving proof that he had done just like she had and tried to immerse himself into the case during every waking moment. It didn't give her much confidence, after all they still seemed no way closer of solving the murder of Gedar. "There are just too many suspects who could have had reason to kill him. Colcord settling an old score, Rosenthal trying to keep him quiet about the shield designs, Yunta for him seeing Decaux and Decaux for him seeing Hopkins. Kolrami had a motive to further

his career and with Lou's admission, even she has a strong motive now."

Apparently that struck a cord with the counselor and he turned to face her suddenly. "We've been operating under the assumption that Gedar was killed by a single individual. What if we are looking at a conspiracy instead? What if this was a *Murder on the Orient Express* kind of thing?"

"Murder on the what?"

He smirked. "A famous crime novel from Earth in which it turns out every single suspect was complicit in the murder."

"Wait a minute," she said and walked to the desk to pick up a few padds. "This reminds me of something I believe Sierra Decaux said very early on." She continued to search the padds until she found the one with the transcript of her statement. "Yes, here it is. When we spoke to her for the first time.

You asked her: *'Did you have any suspicions somebody else may have been involved?'*

Decaux: *'Yes.'*

Me: *'Who?'*

Decaux: *'I can't be certain but we suspected that he was involved with a senior officer.'*

At the time I just thought that it was an innocent slip of the tongue. Or maybe she was talking about her friends or cabin-mates with whom she discussed her personal life but what if she was accidentally referring to co-conspirators?"

He nodded. "It could be but it's not evidence."

"Let's assume for a moment she did. Whom would she have partnered with?"

"I think we can rule out Rosenthal and Colcord. They've only been on the ship a short while, it's unlikely she knew about their history with Gedar."

"Alright. How about Yunta?"

"Yes, that makes sense. Especially if they had begun to suspect that he had been seeing somebody else," he said. "That would have had to infuriate both of them as he was apparently moving on from one woman to the next. And we already know that Yunta is both aggressive and physical."

Nora continued to look at the case notes on the desk. "Decaux doesn't have an alibi and Yunta ..."

Clancy presented her another padd. "Yunta was near engineering that night."

"What?"

Clancy read another transcript:

"Yunta: 'If you are looking for the killer, I think you should have another chat with that civilian engineer.'

Me: 'Colcord?'

Yunta: 'No, not the woman. Rosenthal. I know for a fact he was hanging around engineering at around the time of Gedar's death while he was all alone in there. Plenty of opportunity.'

And she was absolutely right. Rosenthal did admit that he was in engineering and spoke to Gedar that night. But how could she have known this? According to Major Wasco she had an early exercise the next morning which means he would have expected her to be back in her rack long before 2300."

Nora nodded and took the padd. "I remember that. I thought she was just trying to deflect the blame when everything pointed to her."

"And then let's not forget that altercation in the Nest. That did not look like a random encounter."

Nora took a seat when the pieces began to fall in place. "Decaux lost her nerve," she said. "And she blamed Yunta for everything."

"Yunta and Kolrami."

She looked up. "The third conspirator?"

"Without him there wouldn't have been the opportunity. It was on his orders that Gedar was alone in engineering that night," said Clancy. "He set the scene."

"But passed the lie detector."

Clancy nodded. "Maybe because he wasn't the one to push Gedar over the railing. Maybe that was Decaux or Yunta. Or both of them."

"Yes, and that's why he agreed to take the test in the first place because he knew he would pass it," she said and then looked for the padd with his results. "Look at this. When I asked him if there was anyone else in engineering with Gedar the night he was killed, he said no. Which the computer determined to be a lie."

"That is interesting," said Clancy as he looked at the same padd. "He eventually remembered Rosenthal being there."

A large smile formed on her lips. "Yes, eventually. But when the question is asked he doesn't. Which means he knew that there was somebody else with Gedar. His coconspirators."

Clancy took a seat in one of the chairs and considered their conversation. "It all fits. There is just one problem with this theory."

"We have no proof."

He nodded. "So far this is all circumstantial."

Nora Laas stood, a sudden fire in her eyes. "Then what we need is a confession."

The counselor offered a quizzical look.

"Three people were involved in this murder. One of them has already cracked once. All we have to do is find the weakest link and break it."

Day Nine: Last Seen Wearing

- I -

"Fusion reactor at 23 percent power output," said DeMara Deen even while her fingers danced across the *Nebuchadrezzar's* piloting controls, desperately trying to get the damaged reactor to produce enough power to the impulse engines to allow them to get back into orbit.

"Not sufficient for engine initialization," Xylion said calmly, overseeing the efforts from one of the aft stations. "The impulse engine has only 5.2 percent power and requires a minimum of 21.4 percent for safe operation."

"We don't need that much, just enough to lift off and for a single thrust strong enough to clear the planet's gravity. 13 percent engine output should be enough."

"With the damage sustained by the fusion reactor upon landing, our chances to achieve the required power without further repairs is unlikely."

But Deen shook her head, unwilling to give up on the attempt. "We've been through this. We don't have the time for more repairs. We need to go now or Srena is not going to make it," she said. "How do the power couplings look?"

The voice of the tactical officer came over the speakers. *"Not good. I don't think the temporary fix we applied will be enough to maintain this power flow."*

"They just need to hold for a few minutes."

"If the power couplings fail," said Xylion. "We will not be able to utilize the impulse engines to attempt to return into orbit."

Deen turned to look at the Vulcan behind her, her eyes piercing into him. "Xylion, do you happen to have any constructive comments instead of telling us what won't work?"

Her tone was sharp but if he was offended by it, he did well to hide this. "We may be able to transfer power from the life support system to the impulse engines."

"And what do you suggest we breathe once we get up there?"

"I estimate the remaining atmosphere in the vessel will be sufficient to support life for thirty-two minutes and twelve seconds."

"If this works and we can use the impulse engines to get us into orbit, we won't have enough power left to take us back to *Eagle*."

Xylion offered a barely noticeable nod. "Correct. We would have to find a way to draw sufficient attention to ourselves so that *Eagle* will come to us instead."

Deen turned back around with a little sigh. "And without communications that's not going to be easy," she said. "Oh, well, one problem at the time, I guess. Transferring life support to impulse engines now."

"Power to impulse engines increasing," said Xylion as he read his display. "Now at 6.4 percent. 7.8 percent. 9.1 percent. 10.2 percent."

"Come on, come on, just give me a little more," said Deen quietly. "And I promise I'll never speak ill of you again."

"11.2 percent. Impulse engine power now at 12.7 percent and holding steady."

"That has to be enough."

Leva voice came crackling over the speakers. "*Guys, the couplings can't handle the power. They're about to buckle.*"

"Attempting to compensate," said Deen, suddenly very much aware that while the ship could perhaps produce the power they needed to clear this planet, the damaged energy relays were unable to channel it to where it needed to go."

"*It's no good, the couplings will rupture,*" the half-Romulan said, his voice taking on an undeniable edge of urgency.

"Not if I can help," Deen said and, impossibly, her fingers began to move even faster. "Come on, hold together. We had a deal."

"*Dee, shut it down,*" Leva cried.

"One second, I think I got it. Just one more second."

Xylion stepped away from his station and closed in on the Tenarian in the pilot's seat. "Lieutenant, Mister Leva is correct. You must shut it down now."

With a heavy sigh Deen found the shut down command. Except it didn't work.

"*Dee?*" Leva shouted urgently.

She shook her head in frustration. "Some sort of energy feedback loop is interfering with the shut down commands."

Xylion didn't hesitate. "Commander Leva, you must manually disengage the couplings now."

The runabout shook from a small explosion in the rear of the vessel. The room went dark as the lighting and displays failed at the same time.

Deen jumped to her feet. "So?"

To her immense relief the tall Romulan stepped into the cockpit moments later. His already dirty golden uniform shirt further stained, his face smeared and his usually impeccable hair standing up. "Still alive," he said and let himself fall into the chair, clearly exhausted. "Wish I could say the same for the main power coupling."

Not entirely convinced Deen grabbed a tricorder and checked him over. He had minor burns on his hands and face but was otherwise uninjured.

Xylion returned to a workstation after Deen had been able to confirm he was mostly unharmed. Within seconds he had the lighting and most consoles working again. "A power surge from the defective coupling has caused further damage to various systems including life support and the impulse engines."

"We're lucky the fusion generator is still running or we would be out of power for good," said Leva while Deen applied a dermal regenerator to his wounds.

Xylion turned. "I am afraid that luck is not something we have in any kind of supply," he said. "The power surge has damaged the impulse engine beyond our capabilities to repair."

Deen, having finished with Leva's injuries, let herself fall into the chair next to her patient. Her usually beautiful face uncharacteristically mirroring her feelings of complete defeat. "And without engines we have no way to get off this world."

There was silence in the room for a moment as the reality of the situation slowly sank in. They were stranded now with seemingly no chance at all to be able to affect the kind of repairs that needed to be done to change their circumstances. And with that Ensign Srena's fate was apparently sealed as well.

"There may be another alternative," said Xylion, his eyes focused out of the starboard viewport.

His two fellow officers turned to see what he'd been looking at. Deen stood. "Oh, you cannot be serious."

Tela had returned once more and now stood a few meters away from the stranded runabout, looking straight back at Xylion through the viewport.

"She is insistent, I give her that," said Leva.

But Deen angrily shook her head, her recent failure of attempting a lift-off only adding fuel to the fire. "I don't care. We've warned her repeatedly to stay away and I'm done playing these games," she said and headed for the nearest equipment locker to retrieve a phaser. The fire burning in her eyes making it clear that this time she intended to use it.

"Lieutenant. Tela and her people may be our only remaining option to return the *Nebuchadrezzar* to *Eagle* in a timely manner."

Deen looked confused. "How so?"

"They have agreed to help us with repairs."

She shook her head. "I think they were very clear on the matter," she said but then considered him more suspiciously. "Wait a minute. This is about Tela's last visit. What did you agree?"

"That, if we were to be unsuccessful in our attempts to leave this planet, she and her people would assist us."

"And why would they do this?" Leva said. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

Xylion considered first the half-Romulan and then Deen. "Their condition is that I remain behind."

"What?" Deen said. "Absolutely not."

"Lieutenant, may I remind you that I am in command of this away team and therefore this decision falls to me alone. I firmly believe that we have exhausted all other options."

But she wasn't going to have any of that. "I don't care. We're not leaving you behind with these people," she said adamantly. "You are not thinking straight. If necessary we'll have you relieved of command."

"Neither you nor Commander Leva have the authority or the required medical competence to relive me of command under Starfleet regulations," he said in his usually calm tone of voice. "I would further point out that Ensign Srena's life depends on her swift return to *Eagle*."

Deen clearly wanted to argue the point but in the end, she didn't know how.

"Alright," said Leva. "Let's say we agree to this and you stay behind. What exactly can they offer us to get out of here?"

"I intend to find out," said Xylion and headed for the airlock.

Leva and Deen remained behind for just a moment, long enough to exchange a quick look with each other, before they followed him outside.

Tela had greeted her fellow Vulcan with the traditional salute which Xylion quickly reciprocated. "Have you considered my offer?"

"We appear to have no other option available to us."

The young Vulcan woman almost frowned at this. "Please do not assume that it was my wish to place you into a position in which you are forced to accept our terms. I was hoping you would agree to remain with us of your own volition. At least for the time being."

Leva and Deen joined them.

"Nicely put," said Deen. "Where we come from we still call this blackmail. And most Vulcans I know would never stoop to such a low level."

"Perhaps even more reason why we so desperately require Xylion's help," she said.

But Deen was not convinced. "You've really built yourself a nice circular and self-serving argument there. I suppose that way you can justify just about anything, including beating somebody half to death."

Tela held the other woman's gaze without flinching "I am greatly disturbed and saddened by what happened to your colleague. It is unforgivable."

"Right about that."

Leva took a step closer. "How do you intend to help us?"

The young Vulcan woman turned, apparently sending an agreed signal as at least half a dozen of her fellow settlers came into view from where they had been staying out of sight, carrying a heavy equipment crate.

Deen tensed and reached for her weapon.

Tela noticed. "There is no reason for alarm. We have been able to identify spare parts from our own vessel which we believe may be able to assist you with your repairs."

The Vulcans brought the crate closer and opened the lid, allowing the three Starfleet officers to inspect the content.

"I'll be damned," said Leva, surprised at what he found inside. "Is that a —"

"Yes," Xylion said. "A thruster control module. An antiquated model but with a few modifications we should be able to adapt it so that it will be compatible with our systems."

Deen glared at Tela. "What, you couldn't give us back the module you stole?"

"That has proven more difficult. I am convinced we will locate it eventually but perhaps not in the time frame which is so essential to your injured officer."

"This will be sufficient," Xylion said.

"Commander, I don't like this one bit," said Deen.

"If you can offer an alternative solution to our problem, Lieutenant, do not hesitate to voice it."

Deen looked around for a moment. At the almost eager face of the young Vulcan woman, at Leva who seemed uncomfortable with what he knew was their best and perhaps only option and then at Xylion who kept his own visage so perfectly neutral, it was impossible to tell how he felt about having been placed into this position. Lastly she considered *Nebuchadrezzar* which in her current condition wouldn't go anywhere and as such serve as Ensign Srena's deathbed.

She sighed heavily and then led Xylion away a few meters. "As soon as we get back to *Eagle* we come back for you."

"No. If I decide to stay I will do so voluntarily and without deception."

"What is this, some sort of Vulcan honor code I've never heard of before? And besides, nothing about this situation is voluntary."

"I agree that this is not a decision I would have made if the situation were different. However, I must agree that the scientific opportunities to remain here and study not just this particular rogue planet but also the Vulcan population seemingly having devolved into a more unstable Vulcan society are fascinating."

Deen shook her head. "You are a Starfleet officer, you have responsibilities."

"I am also Vulcan and have a responsibility to those who are stranded here who may very well not survive without my assistance. Whereas my skills as a science officer on *Eagle* are in much lesser need at this time."

"The captain won't like this."

Xylion nodded. "I expect that he will not. I have recorded a statement on the *Nebuchadrezzar's* computer to fully explain my reasoning to the captain as well as offer my resignation to Starfleet should this be required."

"You've really thought this through, haven't you?"

Xylion raised an eyebrow at that, as if to imply that that had been a silly question, that of course he applied great scrutiny to all of his decisions.

And Deen understood it was pointless in arguing this point with him any further. There was no changing his mind on this one.

"Now, I suggest we focus our efforts on installing the new thruster module. I estimate the modifications as well as carrying out repairs to the damaged energy couplings will consume the rest of this day cycle and as you are aware we do not have time to spare," he said and turned away. The last word on the subject had apparently been spoken.

- II -

The turbolift doors opened and Elijah Katanga joined Tazla Star already inside. They exchanged brief looks but didn't speak to each other while the doctor took position to her left.

"Deck four," he said and the computer acknowledged with a chirp before the lift sped away again. "So imagine my surprise when I came into sickbay this morning and unbeknownst to me, my patient had already left before she'd been cleared for duty," he said but keeping his eyes trained forward.

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, well, last I checked I was the one with the fancy medical degrees so the diagnosis should really rest with me," he said and then turned to look at her but finding that she was unwilling to make eye contact. "And I can tell you straight, without the smallest doubt in my mind, you are anything but fine."

"You said it yourself," she said, still not glancing the veteran physician's way. "The radiation exposure caused a lot less damage to my system than expected and you were able repair the vast majority of it. You've dealt with all the symptoms."

"What concerns me is why you suffered so few ill-effects while you were exposed to enough radiation to kill a Plygorian mammoth."

She shot him a little smirk. "Must be because I am a lot tougher than you ever gave me credit for."

"Computer, halt lift."

Another chirp and they stopped in their tracks.

Katanga turned to face her. "That is not it, Taz."

"Wait a minute," she said. "I almost die saving this ship including your backside and instead of words of thanks or encouragement, I am treated with suspicion? I expected something like this from Nora, maybe even from the captain but from one of my oldest friends?"

"You have my eternal thanks for heroically sacrificing yourself to try and save all our collective butts, you know that," he said. "But do me a favor and don't use indignant anger to deflect from the real issue here."

"Which is what precisely?"

“The fact that you knew you would survive it. That you knew your life wasn’t in danger.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “If they hadn’t beamed me out of there when—”

He waved her off. “Yes, yes of course. You could have died of radiation poisoning. That doesn’t change the fact that by all accounts you should have succumbed to its effects five to ten minutes before they got you out. But you didn’t. Not because you are some kind of tough guy. Not because you’re a Trill. But because your system has been altered by a substances that has no business being inside of you. It saved your life and you knew it would. Trouble is, nobody else knows about it, do they?”

Star was speechless.

“Jesus, Taz, what do you think would happen once somebody took a closer look? You may have been able to fool your routine physicals but once something serious happened, and we know in this line of work that could be any day of the week, somebody was bound to find out.”

She took a deep breath and turned towards the bulkhead. “Who else knows?”

“Just me for now. I haven’t made any notes in my log yet. Which according to the regs I helped write, by the way, is gross misconduct and reason enough—”

“What are you planning to do?”

“That’s a question I should be asking you?”

She whipped around. “What can I do? I come out with this and not only do I prove all those skeptics right about me, it’ll be the end of my career. And this time for good. There won’t be any third chances for me.”

“But you can’t go on like this. The harm you’re doing to your body is bad enough but you might be endangering the people under your command by being addicted to a substance which alters your mental state.”

“I’ve been doing alright handling it so far.”

“No, Taz, you have not. And this cannot go on.”

They stared at each other for a moment perhaps to determine who would back down first. It turned out to be Star when she nodded slowly. “Alright,” she said. “But allow me to do this on my terms,

alright? I finally managed to establish a little bit of trust with the captain and I don't want to throw all of it away. Let me finish this mission and then I find a way to end all this gracefully."

He looked into her bright green eyes. "This is a terrible idea."

"Please," she said and placed a hand on his shoulder. "If our friendship means anything to you, let me do this one thing."

He uttered another sigh but his facial features didn't relax. "I don't like this one bit but I'll give you a few more days. Then we will have to address this one way or the other."

"Thanks, Eli, I really mean it."

"Don't make me regret this."

* * *

A few moments later Tazla Star entered the captain's ready room, trying hard to put her conversation with the doctor behind her. At least for now.

"Commander, shouldn't you still be in sickbay?"

"Made a miraculous recovery according to our good doctor," she said, comforting herself with the fact that it was half a lie only.

Owens didn't buy it and offered a skeptical look.

"I stole away."

He nodded. "Well, as a man who isn't particularly fond of lying on a bio-bed doing nothing, I can sympathize and won't tell on you."

"I appreciate that."

Owens walked to the replicator and ordered a tonic water for himself and his guest, before placing each on the desk and offering Star a seat.

She took a sip of the beverage. "I never thought I'd develop a taste for it," she said.

"It grows on you."

She nodded and placed the glass back on the desk.

"Now, mind telling me what compelled you to crawl into a radiated Jeffries tube, risking your own life in such a manner?"

"I always thought that's Command 101. Take the initiative when you can even if means to risk your own life to save those of the crew."

“Actually, Command 101 is to assess a situation, identify the most capable person for the job and then order that person to carry out the task even if it risks their life.”

She smiled. “I supposed I’ve always had a more hands-on approach to those things.”

Owens was not in the mood to reciprocate it. “What you did was commendable but I’m not convinced you were the right person for the job, Commander. You’re no engineer. You don’t know nearly as much about those systems than somebody like Lieutenant Hopkins,” he said and leaned forward. “My concern is that you decided to do this in order to prove something.”

She nodded. “Maybe you’re right.”

He glanced at her sharply.

“Sir,” she said and adjusted in her seat. “I will always do what is best for this ship and crew. And when I see such an opportunity, I will take the initiative instead of letting somebody else come to harm. That’s who I am.”

“What if you had gotten yourself in a situation that you could not have handled?”

“I was confident enough of my knowledge of this ship and the systems involved that I knew it wouldn’t come to that,” she said and leaned forward herself. “Sir, if I’d had any doubt that I couldn’t do this, I wouldn’t have gone. I promise you that. I’m not trying to prove myself at the expense of this crew. On the contrary.”

Owens nodded, apparently satisfied with that response, at least for now and then leaned back into his chair again. “Well, Commander, you did it. You saved the ship and I am immensely grateful.”

“Frankly, sir, I don’t require your gratitude. I just need your trust. And for you to understand that there are no lengths I won’t go to in order to serve you and your ship,” she said, more than a little cognizant of the irony of her case following the conversation she just had with Katanga. Here she was, trying to convince Owens that she needed to be trusted while she kept her biggest secret well hidden.

“You have it. As long as you refrain from any more solo heroics.”

She couldn’t help but smirk. She wasn’t entirely sure if he was being all that honest himself at that moment. Only time would tell but for now it was good enough.

“Now that we’ve covered this, any ideas yet who or what nearly caused my starship to blow into little pieces? Is your saboteur behind this?”

“The bad news is that like the other recent cases, this too was no accident. There are simply too many fail-safes in place to avoid this. In fact, from what I can tell this crisis was caused because one of those fail-safes was reprogrammed. Only a very few people on board would have been able to do this.”

Owens nodded, following her logic. “By which I take it the good news is that this greatly reduces the number of possible suspects.”

“There is only one person on this ship who could have caused the emergency shut-off valve to behave in the way it did.”

The captain aimed her a quizzical look.

“Lieutenant Louise Hopkins.”

That look turned into one of astonishment. “You suggest Lieutenant Hopkins is the spy?”

Star shook her head. “No. I can’t see her having any motive to harm the ship and crew. Besides if the crisis had not been averted she would have died along with everyone else on this ship.”

“I don’t believe for one second that Hopkins could be an enemy agent but if there really is one on board this ship, this would have clearly been a suicide mission.”

She nodded. “Yes but it doesn’t make any sense. None of the previous attempts to interfere with the systems on board would have caused the ship to be completely destroyed. Why would a saboteur resolve to such drastic actions now?”

“Because he or she is becoming more desperate,” said Owens.

“That was my first thought,” she said. “Or perhaps we are not dealing with a saboteur at all?”

The captain looked puzzled. “It was your theory, Commander. You said you discovered subspace noise which could have been secret messages.”

She was painfully aware that she had indeed made such a claim and that her theory had in fact turned out to be absolutely correct. Jinsu Gedar had been the spy on the ship and both Louise Hopkins and Lif Culsten had known about it but instead of reporting him, had made a deal with him in which he would agree to leave Starfleet following this mission. Considering the new found trust Owens claimed to have put in

her, she knew she should have told him exactly what she had learned and thereby likely ending both Hopkins' and Culsten's Starfleet careers. But nothing was ever that easy. Nothing was ever quite black and white. Something that she had come to realize once again just a few minutes earlier when she had begged Katanga to keep her secret a while longer. She was under no illusions that that conversation had probably been very similar to the one Gedar had had with Hopkins and Culsten after they had found out the truth about him.

"Or it could have been nothing more than random subspace noise," she said. "There is no way to know for sure." At least that much was technically true.

He looked skeptical and she couldn't blame her for it. After all she had been quite insistent on the accuracy of her theory only to dismiss it now. "Alright, so let's say there isn't a saboteur on this ship. How do you explain all these events?"

She presented him with a padd which he took and looked over. "I can't. Not yet. But I've put together a list of what could be considered unusual events over the last few days and what I've found is that the vast majority of them started once we entered the nebula."

He nodded as he read the report. "The sudden manifold failure almost leading to a warp core breach, the overload in the EPS control room, Culsten hijacking the ship. Wait a minute," he said and looked up. "You've listed my lost night on here?"

She nodded. "From what I can tell, that particular event started it. And in all cases the person in questions couldn't remember doing what they did. Including you."

Owens considered that for a moment. "I've never thought of that."

"Sir, I think something else may be going on here. With your permission I would like Doctor Katanga to examine you as well as all the others involved in these events to see if we can find a connection."

"I'm never the first to volunteer for a medical exam," he said with a little smile and stood. "In this case I'll make an exception."

- III -

"Are you quite sure about this?" said Alex Clancy as he stood outside the cargo bay doors, looking over the team of eight security officers in the corridor who besides wearing their standard sidearms also carried phaser rifles at the ready.

"You said we needed to put on a show," said Nora, also armed with a hand phaser but sans rifle.

"I didn't say to prepare for battle with the Dominion."

"Trust me, I've been a Marine," she said. "There is nothing they understand better than a show of force."

"Honestly, that's what got me worried."

She gave him a smirk. "You can always wait out here."

He seemed to consider this for just a second but then shook her head. "The whole idea is to measure their reactions. I need to see this."

"And you sure you don't want a weapon?"

He shook his head again. "I'm playing the good cop."

"Right," she said and then turned to her men. "Let's go."

The heavy doors in front of them opened and the team stepped into the cargo bay which had been modified to serve as a combined parade ground and exercise facility for the Marines unit which had been stationed on *Eagle* ever since the early days of the war. At the moment a group of about twenty Marines were in the middle of a calisthenics program combining hand-to-hand sparring with multiple other exercises. Nora recognized those drills from her days in the Corps.

The sudden appearance of over half a dozen heavily armed security guards had the intended effect and everyone in the cargo bay immediately stopped what they were doing and turned to the approaching Starfleet team with Nora confidently leading the way, Clancy by her side.

The Bajoran didn't miss that quite a few of the Marines tensed up noticeably. None of them were currently armed, most weren't even wearing combat gear but she understood well that these people prided themselves on the fact that they were always ready for battle, regardless the circumstances and would have fought naked if they had to. And every single one of them was a formidable fighter. Together they not

only outnumbered her security detail, she knew they'd be more than a challenge even as unarmed as they were.

Yunta Fey was among those who had participated in the exercises and judging by her expression she knew they were here for her. To her credit she held her ground even while her fellow Marines closed in around her as if to shield her from an approaching enemy.

Nora smirked inwardly. She hadn't expected anything less.

She and her team came to a stop just a few meters away from the main bulk of the group. Nora had told her men not to point their weapons. Marines were well trained and disciplined. She was fairly sure they wouldn't initiate a conflict but there was no reason to take chances.

"Lance Corporal Yunta Fey," she called out.

For a moment silence was her only response. Yunta was hidden among her peers and the hardened Marines simply stared at Nora and her men as if to bait them to make the first move. After all there wasn't a great love lost between Starfleet Security and the Marines. Sure, they both answered to the same Commander-in-Chief but other than that both saw each other as entirely different animals and usually more competent than the other. Nora, having been on both sides knew the arguments well. The Marines saw Starfleet Security as a wannabe army, not nearly well enough trained or equipped to protect the Federation from the dangers it faced while Security considered the Marines as hammers who saw every problem as a nail needing to be pounded into submission. Nora knew they were both half-right.

The silence was beginning to become uncomfortable when Yunta finally appeared from within her protective cocoon, apparently unhappy to hide herself away like a scared animal any longer. "I'm here."

"You are under arrest," Nora said.

"On what charges?"

The question had not been posed by Yunta but by Major Caesar Wasco who had slipped into the room through a side door and was now approaching the standoff with long strides. "I thought we had reached an understanding," he said once he had closed in on Nora, the veteran Marine seemingly unimpressed by the armed detail backing her up.

"That was before new evidence came to light," said Clancy.

Wasco considered the man. "What evidence?"

"I think this is hardly the place to discuss this."

"Agreed," said the major. "But I'm not sure what you're trying to accomplish with this display here. It is entirely unwarranted."

But Nora kept her eyes on her fellow Bajoran. "We have already witnessed the corporal's temperament once before. I'm not taking any chances this time."

Yunta took a step forward and offered a smirk. "So you are afraid you can't take me a second time, is that it, Lieutenant?"

"Attention!" Wasco barked and every single Marine, including Yunta snapped to instantly. Then he turned back towards the security chief. "You still haven't told us the charges, Lieutenant."

Nora's eyes remained on her suspect. She stood perfectly still and at attention now but she could see the restlessness brewing under the surface. She had to fight herself to remain settled. She knew the feeling all too well. "Conspiracy to commit murder and suspicion of murder in the first degree," she said and then gestured for her people to step forward causing the Marines to tense again. "Now, will you be coming with us or are we going to have a problem?"

"Marines, stand down," Wasco said and once again they responded to his command straight away. "There will be no problems here. Corporal, you will accompany these people and cooperate in every way, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Nora nodded with satisfaction and watched as two of her people put restraints on Yunta.

Wasco in the meantime stepped closer to his security counterpart. "I really hope you know what you're doing, Lieutenant," he said barely loud enough to be a whisper. "If this turns out to be nothing more than a witch hunt, we'll be having some serious words."

Nora nodded sharply. "Noted, Major," she said and turned around as the team escorted Yunta Fey out of the cargo bay.

* * *

Nora and Clancy escorted Yunta into the security office only to find Sirna Kolrami and Sierra Decaux already there, both equally handcuffed and with a security guard watching over them.

“What is the meaning of this?” Kolrami said and jumped on his feet the moment he saw Nora Laas enter the room. He didn’t get far when the security officer placed a strong hand on his shoulder to restrain him. “You can’t treat us like this,” he huffed loudly. “This is outrageous,” he continued, clearly having received the same treatment as Yunta Fey.

“Have they made you aware of the charges against you?” Nora said.

“Something about a conspiracy nonsense.”

“Conspiracy to commit murder and suspicion of murder,” she said calmly. “Do you understand these charges?”

“No, I don’t understand at all,” he said. “I passed your lie detector test. You know I didn’t kill Gedar.”

But Nora glanced at Decaux who still sat in her chair, keeping her eyes diverted. “Crewman, do you understand the charges brought against you?”

She looked up, her eyes wide but didn’t speak.

Clancy spoke up. “All three of you have the right to refuse questioning as well as legal representation.”

“However, if you cooperate now we may be able to clear things up more quickly,” added Nora.

“Then let’s clear things up right now,” said the engineer. “I’m innocent.”

Clancy didn’t miss the odd look Decaux was giving the Zakdorn. It was gone in a flash.

“We will talk to all three of you in turn,” said Nora and then gestured for her security officers to separate the three suspects and move them into individual rooms. The security office only had one interview room so they had cleared Nora’s office and converted a storage room to be use for questioning.

Once all three were secured away, Nora turned to the counselor. “Alright, so now what?”

“Now we wait.”

Ten minutes they waited until they went to see Yunta Fey who was sitting anxiously in her chair when they walked into the interview

room. Clancy sat down while Nora stayed on her feet, her eyes piercing the other Bajoran but otherwise keeping mum.

Yunta returned the stare but it was Clancy who spoke up first.

"I have to be honest, Corporal, it's not looking good."

She redirected her glance. "What are you talking about?"

"We have enough evidence to make a case against you plotting with the others to kill Lieutenant Gedar and so far it appears you are the ringleader," he said while he kept reviewing a padd he had brought.

"Nonsense."

"We already know that you went to see Gedar that night in engineering," he continued. "Which means we can place you at the scene of the crime, giving you opportunity. We know you had the means as you are physically stronger than Gedar as you have admitted yourself and you had motive. You were enraged that he had cheated on you with Crewman Decaux."

"I didn't kill him, I told you this."

Clancy continued unperturbed. "Maybe a deal can be made," he said. "There is a small chance we can reduce the charge to manslaughter but only if you cooperate. If you'll help us reconstruct exactly what happened, perhaps we can convince the prosecution to seek a lesser sentence."

She stared hard at the counselor and then back at the security chief. "You're bluffing. You've got nothing on me."

"Stop playing games, Corporal," Nora said sharply. "We know that you along with Kolrami and Decaux planned this together. You all had your own reasons to go after Gedar. The only question remains, which one of you actually killed him. I'm guessing Decaux, she's the most unstable of the bunch but if we can't get one of you to go down for this, you all go down together."

The Marine turned her head away.

Nora rushed into the converted storage room. Most of the items kept here had been removed save for a couple of bolted down and locked cabinets. A small table and three chairs had been set up. Decaux looked up with concern in her big eyes as the Bajoran barged inside, Clancy following closely.

"She gave you up," Nora said without preamble.

“What?”

Clancy took one of the chairs opposite her and offered a sympathetic look. “We know Sierra, we know what you, Kolrami and Yunta had planned. We know that you all had a bone to pick with Gedar. Yunta says it was your idea.”

“What? My idea?”

Nora hit the table hard with the palm of her hands, causing the lithe woman to jump and look up. “She gave us everything, Crewman. Kolrami hated Gedar’s guts for his behavior and the fact that he was in line for promotion over him. Yunta was furious that he had picked you over her and you, you couldn’t take it that he had already decided to move on to somebody else. So you all got together to teach Gedar a lesson he would never forget.”

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” Clancy offered.

“No, no you don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head desperately.

“Oh, we understand, alright,” said Nora. “All three of you will pay for what you did. Yunta and Kolrami will be charged with conspiracy and spend the next ten to fifteen years in a rehabilitation colony. You on the other hand will go straight to a supermax facility for cold-blooded murder.”

“I ... listen, it’s not like that.”

“Are you denying that you planned to go after Gedar?” Clancy said, keeping his voice much calmer and steadier than Nora did.

“Yes, I mean no. I was mad at him. We all were but we just wanted to teach him a lesson. That’s all.”

Nora and Clancy exchanged a brief glance while Decaux unsuccessfully attempted to dry her tears. They had suspected some form of conspiracy but so far there had been nothing but circumstantial evidence. Contrary to their claims Yunta had held fast, not admitting anything. Decaux’s confession was their first break.

“So something went wrong,” said Clancy focusing on their suspect again. “You confronted him and things went out of control and he was killed.”

“You pushed him over, didn’t you? You pushed him over that railing,” Nora pressed.

“No, no, no,” she cried. “I didn’t kill him, I loved him. I ... I think I loved him. I don’t know anymore.”

“You were blinded by your passion.”

She shook her head furiously. “Yunta and I were supposed to confront him and Kolrami would ensure he’d be alone. We were going to shame him ... and ... I don’t know but before ... before we could do it...” she was sobbing now.

Clancy leaned forward. “What happened before you could confront him?”

She looked right at him. “Kolrami killed him. I saw him do it. Right there in front of my eyes.”

“This is completely and entirely inappropriate,” the engineer fumed, sitting at Nora’s desk while the security chief, Clancy and two armed security guards entered the office. “The way your men came into engineering and picked me up in front of everyone like a common thug. I will be logging a formal complaint with the captain over this.”

“You will have plenty of opportunity to do so in your prison cell,” said Nora with a smug little smile while she stood close to the desk.

“I didn’t kill Gedar,” he said. “You know that. You performed the lie detector on me and I passed it.”

Clancy took a seat again. “Surely you now that those are not foolproof.”

“And not admissible in court either,” Nora added.

“And there was an interesting irregularity in your response,” said Clancy as he looked at the padd.

“What are you talking about?”

“See when we asked you if you knew of anybody else with Gedar on the night he died you said that you weren’t aware of anyone,” said the counselor.

“No, that’s not right. I told you I saw Professor Rosenthal.”

Nora smirked. “You remembered Professor Rosenthal after your answer. But the autonomous response analysis doesn’t quite work like that. It measures your responses at the time you answer the question. It cannot take into account things you may remember after the fact.”

“Which means you told us a purposeful lie when you said that you didn’t know anyone else being with Gedar that night,” said Clancy.

“That’s preposterous.”

“Not quite,” said Nora. “Seeing that Decaux and Yunta just confessed to your little conspiracy to teaching Gedar a lesson.”

His face went blank.

“Your mission,” said Clancy, “was to ensure engineering was clear for the little spectacle you had set up so that first Decaux and then Yunta could confront him while you came back at just the opportune moment with a little crowd to reveal to everyone what a supposed fraud Gedar really was.”

“Humiliating Gedar in front of witnesses would ensure that nobody on board would even consider going out with him again while his reputation would take such a hit that even his upcoming promotion might be in doubt,” Nora continued. “But you decided that humiliating him was not enough, isn’t that right?”

“That is not true.”

“The only thing I don’t understand is how you figured you’d get away with this,” said Clancy.

“It’s easy really,” said the security chief. “You probably thought that the other conspirators would accuse each other with nobody ever really knowing who really killed Gedar. All of them with a motive, none would ever come forward. And maybe that is true for Yunta, after all she is a Marine, passionate but also tough and unlikely to bend under pressure but Decaux is not.”

“Wait a minute – “

“She saw you, Lieutenant. She saw you kill him,” Nora said, leaning in closer.

“She’s lying,” he cried. “She’s lying or she did it herself and is trying to frame me.” He took a deep breath. “Yes, we did plan to humiliate Gedar in public but we didn’t mean to kill him. By the time I got back to engineering neither Yunta nor Decaux were there so I assumed that the plan was off and I left. And later they found him dead down in the pit. But I did not kill him. It must have been Decaux. She’s unstable, surely you’ve realized this by now. She’s lost control and did this.”

“I have nothing more to say to you,” said Yunta Fey when the two investigators returned to the interview room. “I know what you are

trying to do here, playing us off each other and I'll be no part in it. I'll say nothing more until I get a legal representative."

"That's fine. For now we just need you to listen," said Nora, this time taking a seat next to Clancy and opposite Yunta who had crossed her arms in front of her chest defiantly. "You may be the tough one in your little group but Decaux and Kolrami are not and they have given us everything we need to know."

She refused to make eye contact.

"I'll just tell you what we've got so far and you can decide if you wish to continue the silent routine," added Clancy and referred back to his padd. "You, Kolrami and Decaux planned to teach Gedar a lesson. Not kill him but humiliate him in public and reveal him for what he truly was. Kolrami was to set the stage in engineering then both you and Decaux would get your turn at him until the grand finale in front of half the engineering crew."

Nora picked up. "But something went wrong and one of you snapped and killed him, leaving each of you to suspect the other. Decaux believes it was Kolrami and Kolrami is figuring it must have been you."

Clancy and Nora studied her face intently and the way her lower jaw twitched it was obvious she wanted to talk.

"With no clear witness statement we would have to arrest all three of you for conspiracy," said Clancy.

She shook her head. "It wasn't me."

"Now there is something I haven't heard before," said Nora dismissively.

Yunta leaned closer. "It wasn't me."

"Then who?" Clancy asked.

"Decaux," she said without hesitation.

"You saw her kill him?" he said

She shook her head. "No, but it's the only one that makes any sense. She's not all there, if you know what I mean. She's got ... I don't know what but she not healthy. She behaved oddly at times when we planned this and then she confronted me in the Nest, shouting and screaming that Kolrami and I had conspired to kill Gedar and blame it on her. Mark my words, it was her."

"I like Decaux for this," said Nora once they had left the interview room again.

But Clancy didn't appear as convinced. "We don't really have anything on her. We have her confession that she planned with the others to confront Gedar but not kill him."

"Both Kolrami and Yunta believe it was her," she said.

"But they don't have any evidence or even an eyewitness account. In fact the only one who has given us one is Decaux herself and she claims it was Kolrami."

Nora looked towards the doors leading into the storage room where Decaux was being kept. "So what does that mean? That we're back to square one? All this for nothing? I can't accept that. I say we push Decaux harder and make her give us a confession."

But Clancy shook his head. "I don't think that'll work."

"She's weak, I can sense it," she said, her eyes taking on the hard look of a warrior. "I can break her."

"Oh, I'm convinced of that but I don't think that would help us."

"A confession wouldn't help us?"

"I think that with enough pressure Crewman Decaux will admit to being the Klingon Chancellor, that doesn't mean she is," he said shaking his head again. "No, a coerced confession is not admissible in court. The defense will figure it out in no time and not only will the case be thrown out of court, it will also seriously damage your reputation. Not to mention that it would be callous to treat her in that manner."

Nora uttered a heavy sigh and let herself fall back in a chair, knowing that he was right. "Damn you and your humane ways."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Comes with the species, I'm afraid."

"I'm not letting any of these people go, not until I get a confession from somebody," she said and looked up at him. "So what do you suggest we do?"

Before he could get an answer the red alert klaxons came to life, warning of impending danger.

Nora jumped back to her feet. "What now?"

That's when everybody in the room was suddenly and unceremoniously slung to the floor.

- IV -

“How much longer will this take, Doctor?”

“Is there somewhere else you need to be, Captain?” Katanga asked while he was working on a computer station, his back to Owens who was sitting on a bio-bed with small probes attached to his temples.

Owens frowned but before he could shoot back a terse reply, Tazla Star stepped up. “Believe it or not but being the captain of a starship is a busy job, Doctor,” she said, and offering Owens an apologetic look. “So anything you could do to speed this up would be greatly appreciated.”

Katanga turned. He was wearing a blue coat which matched the uniform shirt he wore underneath. There was still no sign of the jacket which usually completed the outfit. He seemed to notice Star’s pleading look and appeared to reconsider his response. “Of course, I understand,” he said and then looked at his impatient patient. “I do apologize to keep you from your duties, Captain. I’m utilizing a new kind of cerebral scan technique since I was unable to find anything out of the ordinary using more conventional methods.”

“What exactly does this involve and –” Owens stopped himself when he felt a sudden stinging pain behind his forehead and reached for his temples. “That ... was not pleasant. A heads-up would have been appreciated.”

Star gave the Doctor a frosty look, clearly not pleased that he was apparently torturing her boss.

“Ah yes, I failed to mention that you might feel a little sting there at the end,” he said and then quickly stepped up to Owens to remove the probes.

“That was more than a little sting,” Owens said sharply.

“Sincere apologies,” he said as he detached the devices and then walked back to his workstation to review the scan results.

Owens and Star joined him.

“Please at least tell me that there was any point to all this,” the captain said.

“I cannot be sure yet,” he said as he looked at the screen. “The computer is just now finishing compiling all the data,” he added and pointed at the screen where four brain wave patterns were displayed next to each other. “I’ve already taken the scans from Lieutenant Hopkins, Kate Smith and Lif Culsten. Now by adding yours I’m hoping that we

find something that could shed some light on what is happening on this ship.”

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“I don’t really know until I’ve seen it.”

Owens sighed and turned away from the screen.

It didn’t take much for Star to notice his skepticism. “Sir, I’m convinced there must be something to link all four of you.”

“But why me? I just had a bad night’s sleep. That doesn’t mean that whatever affected the others affected me as well. If you recall I didn’t try to blow up my ship.”

She nodded. “Yes, but it all seems to have started with that event.”

“Or it could all be complete coincidence.” “It could. But do you have another explanation, sir? I think we should pursue this and see where it leads.”

Owens looked back at Katanga as he closely studied the results on the screen “Well, that’s why I agreed to this,” he said. “But if we don’t find anything we need to start thinking about other theories which – “

The red alert klaxon cut him off.

Star and Owens exchanged a concerned look. Then, before the captain could call the bridge for a status report, the ship was hit hard, causing everyone in sickbay to lose their footing for a brief moment.

“Oh, my stars and garters, that cant be good?” Katanga said after he had picked himself up from the bulkhead he had been pushed into.

Owens had grabbed a nearby bio-bed to stay on his feet and then helped Star back on hers who hadn’t been as lucky. “Bridge, what’s going on?”

There wasn’t an immediate response.

Then Stanmore came on the line, his voice sounded stressed. “*Sir, it appears we are under attack.*”

The captain and the first officer were out of sickbay in an instant, leaving Katanga to look after them with befuddlement. “Attack? Who in damnation would attack us within a toxic nebula?”

Just then his workstation beeped when it had apparently finished its analysis and the veteran doctor turned to look at the screen.

“Oh.”

* * *

Before anyone in the security office even had the time to get their bearings back, another, smaller explosion rocked the room. The door to the storage room opened to allow thick white smoke to escape from it.

Nora pulled herself up. "Decaux!"

Clancy looked that way as well and just in time to see the lithe blonde woman come shooting out of the interview room, a crazed expression on her face. She ran right into the security guard who had been posted to secure the door. As the man had not been able to fully get back on his feet yet, he was practically steamrolled by the much smaller woman. And yet, somehow, she had the presence of mind to grab his phaser.

"Decaux!" Nora shouted. "Stop her." The crewman looked up like a startled animal at a room filled with men and women seemingly determined to apprehend her.

Her advantage for the moment however was not just the fact that she had been able to secure a weapon, most of the security personnel were still trying to recover from the unexpectedly heaving deck moments earlier.

She managed to shove the first person she got to over a desk before shooting off into the opposite direction and then continued to zigzag through the room, trying to find her way to the exit and avoiding the guards attempting to keep her from escaping.

Decaux was small and slippery and clearly very much determined not to be cornered. She weaved and bobbed around the startled personnel which had not expected to have to stop a fugitive so shortly after having been slung to the floor by unknown forces.

Nora watched with dread. She was out of position to try and cut her off and had already made the painful determination that nobody else was going to catch her before she got to the doors. She spotted Carlos on the opposite side of the room, removing a phaser from an equipment locker. "José," she called and reached out her hand, indicating for the weapon.

Her deputy understood immediately and tossed the phaser her way.

Nora felt as if the firearm was sailing through the air in slow motion, very much aware that with every second, Decaux was getting

closer to that exit.

She finally managed to snag it out of the air when it was in reach, turned on her heels and fired.

Only to see the crimson beam catch the bulkhead outside the security office through the open doors through which Sierra Decaux had only a split second earlier slipped out of.

“Frak,” she cursed and immediately ran after her. The quickest route being across a couple of desks which she unceremoniously slid across, not caring that she deposited their content across the floor in process.

She reached the corridor and immediately found it packed with people. She cursed her luck. Shift change.

Nora could hear the commotion down the corridor as her fugitive was apparently barreling her way through the crowd.

“Decaux!” she called after her as she made her own way through the far too slowly parting throng. “Stop!” Of course she did not and Nora nearly missed her dashing into a smaller side corridor which was thankfully less filled with people.

“Computer, I need a force field. Deck fifteen, section nine, junction Baker-four,” she said as she continued her pursuit.

The computer replied with soft trill. “Force field erected.”

She smirked when she turned another corner and saw Decaux at the far end of the corridor, her forward progress stopped by an invisible barrier. The woman turned to see the security chief approaching and her eyes grew wider.

She raised her phaser. “End of the line, Sierra.”

The woman slipped into an adjacent room.

“Oh, come on,” Nora moaned and ran up to the doors to follow her. She carefully activated the door mechanism before stepping inside. It was a small room with only two other doors leading out of it. “Computer, what is the location of Crewman Sierra Decaux?”

“Crewman Sierra Decaux is on deck fifteen, section nine, environmental substation eight-eight-one.”

That sounded familiar. “Computer, what’s my location?”

“Your current location is deck fifteen, section nine, environmental substation eight-eight-one.”

Nora looked around. There was no place to hide in this room and according to the computer she hadn’t left it. That’s when she noticed the

small shiny object in the corner. She took a knee and picked it up to discover that it was her combadge. "Clever girl," she said. "Computer, disregard Crewman's Decaux's combadge and determine her location."

"Unable to comply."

"Why the hells not?"

"Internal sensors are not operational." "Right," she said and stood. She quickly made her way to the first door, opened it and found that it led back into another corridor. Both sides were clear. So she went back to check on the other door. This one led to an empty storage closet.

Frustrated she returned back to the substation. There was a Jeffries tube access hatch. When she inspected it more closely she realized it was slightly ajar. Nora yanked the hatch open and found nothing but an empty crawlspace. But she thought she heard something. Boots climbing a ladder.

She holstered her weapon and crawled into the tube. After a few short meters she reached a central junction along with a ladder leading upwards and just in time to see a figure disappear into another junction above.

Without hesitating she climbed the stairs to follow her once more.

She thought Decaux had climbed at least two decks but was fairly certain when she heard another Jeffries tube access hatch opening just above her. She tapped her combadge. "Security team to deck thirteen, section ... uh ... Charlie-six. And make it quick," she said but kept her voice down in order not to let Decaux know that she was close on her tail.

Nora made it to deck thirteen and down the same Jeffries tube she was certain Decaux had used just moments before. Her suspicions were confirmed when she found another hatch left ajar. She opened it carefully to find one of *Eagle's* large, cavernous cargo bays beyond.

"Computer, lights," she said just loud enough to ensure the audio interface would pick-up her request.

An aborted trill indicated that the computer wasn't able to comply. Decaux had managed to disable the lights somehow.

"Okay, so you're not stupid," she said as she was forced to climb out of the hatch and into an almost completely dark cargo bay. This one had been used to store parts for the sensor array, and even though the device was nearly complete, the bay was still packed with crates and containers, some piled up so tall, they nearly reached the twenty-foot

tall ceiling.

She drew her phaser and took a few careful steps forward. There were far too many dark places to hide here. Nora had a good view of the main doors and considering that she hadn't heard them opening, it was a good bet Decaux was still in here. Perhaps trying to get to a secondary exit.

"It's over, Sierra, you're just making things worse for yourself," she said, loudly, hearing her voice reverberating throughout the hold. "Come out, with your hands up and I'll make sure you get a fair trial." Nora slowly began to search the room, making sure she kept an eye on the main doors in case Decaux made a run for them.

Then she thought she heard footsteps to her right.

She stopped and listened. A skill she had honed well when she had been much younger and leading a cell of teenage freedom fighters on Bajor many years ago. Back then it had been a skill which could have meant the difference between life and death.

Decaux was on the move.

Nora turned towards the far corner from which she was sure the sound was coming from.

Then she saw her.

"Last chance, Crewman," she said as she leveled her phaser and moving sideways to get into optimal position.

The other woman still didn't respond.

When she was sure Decaux was cornered, she took a few long leaps and reached out for her prey.

Her hands made contact with fabric and she yanked hard.

Only to come away with a loose jacket.

Decaux had used part of her uniform as a ruse. Nora cursed for falling for such an obvious ploy, one she had used herself on many occasions against her Cardassian enemies.

She heard a loud grunt coming from just a few meters away and whipped around, ready to blast the other woman into unconsciousness.

But she wasn't there.

Instead she saw a tower of bright yellow barrels teetering precariously. Too late did she realize what had happened.

Decaux, on the other side of those highly stacked barrels, had given them a hard shove and while for a moment it had appeared too much for the young woman to topple them, the ship trembled once more at

the most inopportune moment and just enough to allow gravity to make her plan work and bringing the barrels down.

“Decaux!”

The woman was sprinting towards the exit.

For Nora, chasing after her was suddenly a distant priority. Those barrels were coming right for her and she had only a couple of seconds to make a move which might save her life.

So she jumped as far as she could, rolling on the floor when she made contact and tried her hardest to get out of the way. When she heard the first ones slam into the floor, she thought she had come away clean.

That’s when she felt something hitting her hard in the shoulder and she stumbled just as she tried to get back onto her feet, landing painfully on her chest.

Knowing that she may not have time to catch her breath, she instantly flipped onto her back and just in time to see one of those bright yellow barrels coming for her head.

She rolled away a split second before it had a chance to turn her into paste.

Nora heard the doors opening and immediately tried to get back on her hands and knees but felt her strength give out.

The sound of multiple boots rushing her way let her know that reinforcements had finally arrived.

“Laas, are you alright?”

She glanced up to see Alex Clancy hovering over her. He had arrived at her side even before any of her security people, clearly having raced to her prone form the moment he had spotted her.

Nora moaned and tried to get herself off the floor.

“Easy,” he said as he helped her up. “You’ve been injured.”

But the security chief wasn’t interested in taking things easy. “Decaux,” she said and looked towards the heavy cargo bay doors, fully extended at the moment with at least five heavily armed security guards covering the exit and the corridor beyond. But there was no sign of the fugitive. “Where ... where is she?”

Clancy seemed much more concerned with Nora and the way she winced when he gingerly touched her upper body. “I think you have dislocated your shoulder,” he said. “You must be in a great deal of pain.”

She glared at him and tried a few steps but ultimately was forced to lean against a container when she felt her strength not returning as quickly as she had hoped. "Never mind the pain," she fumed. "Where is she?"

Clancy slowly shook his head. "She must have slipped away just before we got here," he said ruefully. "Carlos and a team are searching the deck."

Nora let herself slide down onto the floor, unable to stay on her feet. "Find her. Find her now. She's our killer and I will not let her slip through my fingers again, do you hear me? I'm going to get her even if it's the last thing I do."

“Report,” Owens barked as he stepped out of the turbolift, followed closely by Tazla Star.

Lieutenant Lance Stanmore stood at the center of the bridge – the junior officer obviously not having been quite comfortable enough to sit in the big chair while he was in temporary command – now turned to face the two command officers striding his way. “We appear to be under attack, sir.”

Star frowned at the man. “Appear?”

He looked apologetic at his vague report. “We have not been able to detect an attacker. There are no other vessels in the immediate vicinity, we can’t even detect weapon’s fire but something has hit our shields. Something powerful.”

As if on cue, the ship trembled again. Nowhere near as much as it had the first time, but the deck plates rumbled noticeably.

Stanmore headed for the operations console to relieve Ensign Milestone and to take over the station. “We were unprepared for the initial attack. Had no warning,” he said as he sat in the chair Milestone had vacated. “We were able to reinforce the shields.”

Star glanced at Trinik, the Vulcan officer in charge of tactical operations while So’Dan Leva was away.

“Another hit to our aft shield grid,” he said. “Shields are down to eighty-five percent.”

Owens sat down in the command chair with purpose, ready to face their attackers. “Put that section on the screen, Lieutenant.”

The main viewer shifted from showing the almost completed sensory array slightly to starboard to instead allow a view of the area immediately behind the ship from where the latest attack had originated.

But instead of showing a vessel that might have been responsible, the screen revealed nothing but the empty nebula.

Star and Owens exchanged looks.

“Sensors?” he said.

Stanmore shook his head. “There’s nothing there, sir.”

“No,” said the Trill officer. “There is nothing there according to sensors but obviously we are being target by somebody or something.”

The captain nodded in agreement. "Mister Trinik, scan for cloaked vessels."

"Metaphasic sweep is negative," said the Vulcan after initiating another scan, specifically designed to reveal more primitive cloaking technologies.

"We should try a tachyon scan as well," said Star.

"Mister Stanmore?" Owens said.

"It'll take a minute to set up, sir."

"Get started."

The first officer turned to the captain. "It makes no sense, why would a cloaked vessel be attacking us? And how would they even be able to operate within Aphrodite?"

He considered that for a moment. "Perhaps the Dominion has learned of our efforts to construct the spy array. After all your own theory proposed that we have a spy onboard."

Star did not look convinced. "And they've suddenly developed a cloaking technology they've never used before? One that allows them to fire while cloaked?"

The ship shook again from another attack.

"Starboard shields have been hit," said the tactical officer. "Shields now at seventy-nine percent power."

"On screen," said the captain.

But once again there was nothing there.

And then another strike.

"Lower port shields," said Trinik. "Power at seventy-six percent."

"It has to be more than one attacker," concluded Star.

Owens stood and took a step closer to ops. "Where's that tachyon scan, Lieutenant?"

"Ready now, sir. But it will have a limited range. The best I could do on short notice."

"Whoever is attacking us is nearby," he said. "It will do. Scan our immediate surrounding for cloaked ships."

Stanmore nodded and went to work.

On the main viewer, Owens could see bright azure beams shooting out into the nebula around them, trying to reveal what was hidden.

After just a few moments, the operations officer shook his head with frustration. "Nothing, sir."

The next attack came from directly ahead, judging by the way the ship shuddered. Owens turned to look at the tactical officer standing at his elevated station behind his chair, frustration clearly evident on his face.

“Direct hit to forward shield grid,” he said. “Shields down to seventy-two percent.” He looked up from his board. “Sir, judging by the intervals between each attack, as well as the location of the impacts, it is my belief that we are being attacked by at least five different sources.”

Star stood. “We’re surrounded?”

He offered a minimal nod. “That would be the logical conclusion.”

“I’m not willing to just sit here and take one hit after the next. Let’s see if we can discourage whoever is responsible,” said Owens and looked towards tactical. “Program a firing solution. I want sustained phaser burst into each direction from where we’ve been hit.”

The Vulcan nodded and within a few moments signaled his readiness.

“Fire.”

“Firing phasers.”

Lances of hot crimson energy were slung every which way and yet seemingly nowhere at all. Everyone on the bridge could tell that none of the many blasts were connecting with any tangible targets.

The response however came quickly enough.

Owens steadied himself against his chair. “Random patterns, Lieutenant. Fire into every direction. Make sure you do not hit the sensor array.”

“Firing random sequence,” the tactical officer said.

Eagle sprayed phaser fire once more in a desperate attempt to connect with anything but finding nothing.

“No hits detected,” Trinik said.

And yet *Eagle* was hit again.

The captain looked at his first officer.

“I can’t explain it,” she said. “But considering the situation I don’t think we should stay in one place for too long. We’re a sitting duck here.”

He nodded. “Agreed,” he said and turned to Aliris, the young Risian woman who was now handling piloting duties while Culsten was suspended and Srena was off the ship. “Ensign, find us a place to

go. Any direction from which we have not yet been attacked. One quarter impulse.”

The brown-skinned woman nodded and consulted her board. “Changing course to one-six-four mark nine, engaging at one quarter impulse.”

The first officer stepped closer to the captain. “That’ll take us into a direction directly out of the nebula.”

Owens considered her for a moment and then looked back towards the screen.

Then she voiced his own fears. “They could be leading us right into a trap.”

- VI -

He could tell that she was fuming, had been ever since he had found her in the cargo bay earlier, and having come within a hair's length of being crushed by an avalanche of barrels which had been dropped on top of her. And she was still just as angry as she stepped back into the security office.

Clancy watched her as she retrieved a phaser rifle and checked its energy cells. He walked up to her. "What did the captain say?"

She didn't even look up or otherwise acknowledged his presence. "There wasn't much to say. We found the killer and I let her go."

"It wasn't your fault, Laas."

She whirled around to face the counselor. "How was it not my fault?" she said, her voice higher perhaps than she had intended and causing a number of heads to turn her way. She took a deep breath before continuing in a softer tone. "I had her cornered in that cargo hold. Had her dead to rights. Until she played me like a first year cadet. Nearly took me out as well. I should've been able to stop her."

"She has nowhere to go."

Nora activated her phaser rifle, allowing it to whine loudly for a moment. "That's right. The captain is busy with whatever is attacking us and I can't be much help to him with that. But I can find Decaux and bring her to justice. He gave me the green light to search the ship. Room by room if necessary."

He nodded slowly. "There is something else you should know," Clancy said and raised a padd. "I'm not sure why I didn't see it before. It's something both Yunta and Kolrami alluded to earlier. That she was somehow off and not quite there. It reminded me of her seemingly irrational fear the other day of going to sickbay after her altercation with Yunta in the Nest."

"What is it?"

"I did some digging through her medical file. We don't have much about her before she joined Starfleet and her psych evaluation wasn't as thorough as I would have liked, no doubt one of the sacrifices made due to personnel shortages."

Nora looked impatient, clearly eager to join the search for the fugitive. "Get to the point please."

“Well from all I’ve read about her and granted that isn’t much, she has all the signs of some sort of personality disorder,” he said. “I think she could be suffering from paranoia and perhaps even schizophrenia.”

“Fantastic. We could have used that information a few days ago.”

He shook his head. “It doesn’t make her a killer.”

“Doesn’t it?” she said. “May I remind you that she set off an improvised smoke bomb in here, escaped and tried to kill me? I don’t think she could be any more guilty.”

“Maybe but we need to be careful with her when we find her.”

“I’m done playing nice,” she said and headed for the doors, she stopped when she noticed that Clancy was following her and turned to face him.

“I’m going with you. You may need my help when you find her.”

She shook her head resolutely. “We’re not going to need your help to find her,” she said. “We’ll slap some restraints on her and put her into a holding cell from which she won’t be able to escape. Once she’s secured you can diagnose her to your heart’s content. But until then, I suggest you go get some rest. It’s been a long day.”

Clancy couldn’t deny that, nor the exhaustion he felt. Of course however long and stressful it had been for him, he knew it had been much more so for Nora. Naturally she was not inclined to show any sign of weakness. Especially not now and in front of him.

“Listen, Alex, I appreciate all your help, I really do. But this is something I need to do. I’ll promise I’ll call you as soon as I have her in chains.”

He frowned at her wording but also didn’t miss her softer tone, the fact that she had called him by his given name, that she had perhaps even started to see him as more than just a fellow officer. “Good luck.”

She shot him a lopsided grin. “Not a matter of luck. Just a matter of time,” she said and headed through the doors.

* * *

Alex Clancy didn’t quite manage to stifle a yawn as he headed back towards his quarters. He was tired, he realized. But he also knew that he wouldn’t find that rest that Nora had recommended. Instead he’d do

what he had done every night since he had joined the investigation and go through the case notes until sleep eventually overwhelmed him.

He was even more determined tonight, after all he couldn't help but feel guiltily that he hadn't made the connection regarding Sierra Decaux's mental state sooner. Granted there wasn't any definitive evidence that she suffered from a personality disorder but Clancy had been in his field long enough to be able to put the pieces together.

He also understood that many psychological illnesses could be cured with the right medication and treatments and many who suffered from them could still live mostly normal and productive lives, could even serve Starfleet and the Federation with distinction.

But he was concerned about Decaux. She had either hidden her condition, perhaps fearful that she wouldn't be allowed in Starfleet or even worse, had severely underestimated the affect it had on her mental and emotional health.

And if that was the case, perhaps she had indeed snapped when she had realized that Gedar had been involved with another women. Or had not been able to process that he wanted far less than a relationship from her and had moved on when she was not willing to compromise. Perhaps she hadn't meant to kill him but had been unable to ignore the opportunity when it had presented itself as part of the plan she had conceived with Yunta and Kolrami to teach him a lesson and things had spun out of control.

Whatever the case, he knew they needed to find her and get her the help she needed.

Clancy stepped into his dark quarters and headed straight for his desk where his collection of padds still littered the worktop. "Computer, time."

"The time is 2349 hours."

That alone caused him to yawn again.

"Maybe just a few minutes," he said as he looked over his notes, not sure if he'd last even that long.

"It wasn't me."

The voice coming from behind him caused him to spin around, suddenly wide awake.

Sierra Decaux stepped out of the darkness and she looked awful. Her usually finely combed, long blond hair completely disheveled and

her eyes bright red as if she had cried for a long time. She was shivering noticeably. "I didn't do it."

"Sierra," he said and took a step towards her. He froze when he spotted that tiny type-one phaser. Not yet pointed at him but nervously shaking in her hand.

"Nobody believes me but I didn't kill Jin," she said. "I ... I loved him."

Clancy nodded slowly. "I believe you."

She fixed him with a hard stare. "No ... no you don't. You are like her. Like Nora and all the others. You think I killed him."

"What I think," he said, careful not to make any threatening moves towards her, "is that you are not well. That you need help and I can —"

"No," she screamed so loudly it caused him to flinch. "I don't need help. I know what I saw. I know."

He nodded slowly. "Okay, what did you see?"

"I saw him do it. I saw him kill Jin. I saw him throw him down that warp pit," she said her voice taking on a couple of octaves.

"Who did you see?"

"Kolrami. It was Kolrami," she said and then looked away and towards the windows still showing the nebula filled with seemingly endless colorful sprites dancing around the ship. "Or perhaps ... perhaps not him. Perhaps it wasn't him."

Clancy could feel that he was losing her and more worrisome, losing control. He was never more painfully aware that he was after all just an assistant counselor. Sure, he had partaken in criminal investigations in some seedy places, and had plenty of experience counseling fellow crewmembers but confronting a seemingly crazed and armed woman was not an art he had yet mastered. "Why don't we sit down and talk about this," he said. "I'll get us something to drink. How does some tea sound?"

But before he could even turn towards the replicator, Decaux jumped forward and grabbed him by his shoulders. "It's them, don't you see? It's them!"

He was too startled to even think of trying to free himself. "Who?"

"They are inside of us. Inside our heads," she said and let go and then stepped away again, turning her back on him. "They made him do it."

Clancy braced himself for his chance. "Who made him do it?"

She whirled back around before he could try to make a move and perhaps tackle her to the floor. "They are in our heads. Maybe they are in my head, too," she cried, her eyes growing moist as she moved the phaser to her temple. "I need to get them out."

Now he did take a step closer, fully aware that at point blank range, the small weapon was going to be deadly. "Wait, Sierra. Whoever they are, they're not in your head."

"How do you know?"

"Because ... because you were aware of your actions, weren't you? The way you built that smoke bomb in that room from just a few supplies, that was all you, wasn't it? Your knowledge, your ingenuity, nobody else's, right?" he said, knowing full well he was grasping at straws but he needed to do whatever it took to get her to point that weapon away her body.

She nodded slowly. "Then maybe they're not in me," she said and turned the weapon on him. "Maybe they are in you. Maybe they are controlling you right now. You and everyone else on this ship."

Clancy took a step backwards, raising his hands. "But then why would I not want to see you hurt? Why would I want to help you, Sierra? Those things ... you said they killed Gedar. They are evil?"

"Yes, they are monsters," she said and her hand was trembling now with the phaser still pointed at him. "They are killers. Evil things inside of us."

"And I don't want to hurt you. I don't want you to hurt yourself. Please, think about this. What if you're wrong about me?"

"But I've seen them. I know what I've seen, I know they are real," she cried but did lower her weapon and then paced the room. "I know they are here. Inside the ship, inside our minds."

"And I believe you. But running around with a phaser is not going to make others believe you, you must see that. Just give me the weapon and we'll explain to the others what has happened."

She seemed to consider that for a moment, or maybe she was too preoccupied with other thoughts but she didn't speak, simply continued to pace the length of the quarters, refusing to let go of the phaser.

"Sierra, please, let me help you."

"No," she screamed again, taking hold of her hair with one hand and raising the phaser with the other, once again pointing it at the

counselor. "No, you don't believe me. None of you do. You think I killed Jin. Don't try to deny it. But I'll make you see, I'll make all of you see," she said and then darted for the door.

"Sierra, wait," he called after her. She had already disappeared. Alex followed her out of the doors just to see her rush around a corner down the corridor. By the time he had reached it there was no longer any sign of her.

He hit his combadge. "Clancy to Nora."

"Go ahead," came her prompt reply.

"I've found her," he said. "Or rather, she found me."

Day Ten: Storm Warning

- I -

It had taken them the better part of the day just to install the antiquated thruster module into the innards of *Nebuchadrezzar* and then just as much time to get its systems to accept the alien part as one of its own. But in the end, it had seemingly all worked out. They didn't have the time to run comprehensive tests but those they had carried out all showed the same, encouraging results. The module would allow them to lift off and produce sufficient thrust to clear the rogue planetoid's gravity. By all indications they'd even be able to clear orbit and take them back towards *Eagle*. It would take them too long to reach the ship without a working impulse engine but it might just take them back into communications range.

"I say it's as good as it gets," said Leva after he finished the latest simulation with Deen and Xylion standing behind him and observing the results.

"I would prefer another round of tests," said Deen but then turned her head to look towards the back of the ship where she knew Srena still lay unconscious in a bunk, her vital signs slowly fading. "But I'd rather not take the chance."

"It is agreed then," said Xylion. "You will depart immediately and attempt to return to *Eagle*."

Leva rose from his chair. "And you are sure we can't change your mind about this."

"These people require my help," he said.

"You've got people back on the ship who'll need you."

Xylion shook his head fractionally. "The difference I might be able to make here is far more significant. My capacity on *Eagle* has been limited, especially now since my duties as a first officer are no longer required and the need for a science officer has become superfluous. However these settlers show clear signs of slowly devolving in such a manner which could put them at significant risk and cause them sufficient harm to destroy themselves," he said and then headed to the back of the runabout.

Leva glanced at Deen. "So we're just leaving him behind?"

"Unless you want to stun him and drag him off this planet against his will, I'm not quite sure we have a choice," she said as she looked after him.

"This doesn't feel right," he said shaking his head. "We've already lost Commander Edison. Wenera left us and now him, too."

Deen had nothing to offer to this. She understood that life meant change, more so during time of war when every tomorrow was uncertain. Perhaps, she wondered, they had been lucky that the crew had been together for as long as they had. She had always felt that the senior officers on *Eagle*, for the most part, had considered their assignments as more as just a stepping-stone in their career. They had become friends over the years and with a desire to stay together and make *Eagle* their home. It was the reason why she had never seriously attempted to get promoted out of her post or onto another starship even if her true passion had been science and not operations. She had simply become too comfortable on *Eagle* and surrounded with the people there.

She knew of many other ships where officers came and went as they climbed through the ranks but then she also knew of those where the senior staff had stayed almost unchanged for years. Then there were ships which attracted tragedy like a magnet and involuntary crew rotations were the norm. She couldn't help but wonder if *Eagle* wasn't becoming one of those ships.

When Xylion returned not two minutes later, he was carrying a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. He had packed lightly for what very well may have been a very long stay away from the rest of the galaxy.

He raised his hand in the traditional Vulcan fashion. "It was an honor to serve with you both," he said. "May you live long and prosper."

But Deen resolutely shook her head. "Oh no, you're not getting away that easily," she said and then quickly stepped up to him and before he could even brace himself, she quickly hugged him tightly. She felt tears in her eyes at having to say goodbye to the second friend in the same week. "I'll miss you, Xyl. It won't be the same without you and your jokes."

He gave her a curious look, raising one of his eyebrows in true Vulcan fashion after she had let him go and she uttered a little laugh at his dumbfounded expression.

Leva stepped up next to her. He wasn't a hugger but he did hold out his hand and Xylion, to his credit, didn't hesitate to shake it. "You watch out for yourself, Commander."

He offered a quick nod and then after looking both his fellow officers in the eye one last time, turned towards the airlock and left the ship.

Deen could see Tela waiting for him through the lateral viewport. She seemed genuinely pleased to see him coming her way. "Someone's loss is somebody else's gain," she said quietly.

Leva had already sat down in the co-pilot's chair. "We better get this bird in the air," he said. "The longer we delay the less chance Ensign Srena has."

She nodded quickly and took her seat next to him. But before she began the pre-flight preparations, she glanced at the half-Romulan at her side. "You think he's going to be alright?"

"Who Xylion?" he said and then looked out of the viewport where he could see him standing next to the young Vulcan woman, watching the runabout. "I'm sure he's going to be just fine considering his new company."

Deen frowned. "You don't think that's the reason he decided to stay. For her?"

He continued to look their way, not missing how close the two Vulcans stood to each other. "I'm not sure. The attraction seems undeniable, especially from her. Any if he was any other man I'd say that it must have played a part in his decision."

"But not Xylion. He's as pragmatic as a Vulcan can be."

"Maybe not quite as much as we thought," he said and then turned back to his instruments.

Deen did the same even if she wasn't quite able to keep it completely out of her mind.

"Engaging thrusters."

The runabout rocked slightly as it tried to free itself from the ground it had been wedged into for the last few days. It was a short battle and one which the small starship eventually won. It lifted off shakily at first, like a bird which had only just learned to defy gravity.

"Increasing power to thrusters," she said and activated the corresponding panels.

The ship stabilized about fifteen feet above ground.

“So far so good,” said the tactical officer. “Let’s take her up.”

“Activating aft propulsion,” she said as she shifted power from the ventral thrusters designed to allow them to lift off, to the much more powerful engines at the rear of the ship.

They kicked in with surprising power, pushing both pilots into their seat as they quickly accelerated to multiple speeds of sound. Deen angled the nose upwards in time to avoid a rather unfortunate and likely fatal encounter with the mountain range which had surrounded them since they had crashed on the planet, and the *Nebuchadrezzar* hurled towards the skies like she’d been shot out of a cannon.

“Artificial gravity, life support and inertial dampers are all working at minimal power but hopefully will last long enough to get us back to *Eagle*.”

“Or rather *Eagle* come to us,” said Deen, fully aware that they were not going to make it under their own power.

“Clearing the atmosphere now.”

Her eyes grew wider when they had broken through the deceptively gray and white sky to reveal the nebula hidden beyond it. But they were greeted by far more than the beautiful spectrum of colors which made up Aphrodite. “I forgot about those.”

“Evasive actions!”

Deen’s fingers were already on the right controls and she rolled *Nebuchadrezzar* sharply to starboard, feeling it respond much more slowly and sluggishly now that its primary thrusters were controlled by outdated technology. She was also painfully aware that she wasn’t nearly as fast or imaginative controlling the ship as Srena may have been. It was however, just enough to avoid a lightning bolt like energy discharge to make direct contact with the ship. In their weakened state and without functional shields, she was pretty sure they would not have survived the hit.

“Is it just me or did that seem like it was aiming for us?”

“Another one. Look out!” Leva cried.

They both held on to their consoles for dear life as Deen managed to dive underneath another incoming strike. She had the foresight, or perhaps it was luck, to bring the *Nebuchadnezzar* back on a heading towards the planet itself. The sudden pull of gravity was fortuitous because it caused another lighting attack to miss the runabout by what appeared to be a hair’s width. Deen managed to redirect their thrust just

in time to avoid a fiery reentry into the atmosphere and instead the ship bounced off the planet's outer atmosphere and pushed away from its gravity like a slingshot. Two more bolts of angry, white energy zapped through the space around the *Nebuchadrezzar* but failed to hit the ship on both occasions, just before it dove back into the apparent safety of the thick crimson-glowing nebula surrounding the rogue planet.

Leva let go a heavy sigh as if he had held his breath. "That was entirely too close."

"Call me crazy but it almost felt like those things were trying to keep us from getting away from that planet in one piece," she said as she collected her wits again after the near-death experience. She would have liked to ascribe their miraculous escape to her flying skills but she knew that it had been sheer luck. She wasn't that good and the ship not that maneuverable.

"Let's contemplate that once we get back to *Eagle*."

She agreed with the sentiment whole-heartedly, however another problem seemed to be developing. Her status board was rapidly turning from amber, indicating systems operating at non-optimal condition, to a glowing red, advising of imminent failures.

Leva saw it too. "What's happening? Where we hit?"

Deen shook her head. "No, not according to sensor but all systems are shutting down one by one."

"I don't understand," he said and desperately began to work his controls in an attempt to stop or at least slow down the cascade failures. "Maybe the energy discharges somehow affected the ship by their proximity."

"I can't see how," she said. "None of the systems registered any kind of spikes. No, I think this may be unrelated."

"Then why are our systems shutting down?"

She had no idea. "Can you determine the source?"

"It looks like the first system to fail was..." he stopped and looked at her. "The thruster control module."

Her eyes grew a little wider. "Was it faulty?"

"I don't think so. At least there was no sign of a malfunction. And even if that's the case, why would it affect all other systems?"

The lights dimmed at first before they completely went out. The hum of the engines went next. Then every single console shut down and the runabout began to drift.

"I don't think we're going to get answers to that any time soon," she said. "We're dead in the water."

"Without life support we only have maybe eight to ten hours of breathable air left."

She left her seat and headed for one of the aft stations. "I wouldn't worry about how much air we've got left. We'll freeze to death long before it'll run out."

He looked after her. "That's what I love about you, Dee. You're an eternal optimist."

She offered him one of her trademark smiles. "I suppose it's in my nature," she said and then removed a hatch underneath the console. "Also, before it gets to any of that, I was hoping we could try and get communications working again."

After a couple of minutes of working on the innards of the runabout, Leva's console came back to life. It flickered noticeably and remained dimmer than when it operated normally but at least it was operational.

"You did it," he said and began to work.

She stood with a satisfied smile and walked over to him. Her sense of accomplishment quickly waned when she noticed his frustrated frown.

"Damn, not enough power to send a message. Best I can do is a low frequency pulse. But in this soup, by the time it gets to *Eagle*, it be nothing more than static."

She considered that for a moment. "Then we have to make sure that they'll be able to recognize whatever we send."

"Easier said than done. We have only one shot at this. After that we're out of power."

She nodded. "Okay, let's think about this. We can't send clear text or a recognizable voice message. What does that leave us?"

"We could try a series of tones. If we're lucky they might receive those."

Deen smirked again. "I think I know just the thing."

- II -

Owens looked down at this desk and the glass of tonic water on top of it, the clear liquid making small circular waves from the vibrations caused by the ongoing and still unidentified attacks against his ship.

The frequency and more importantly the intensity had significantly reduced since *Eagle* had set course for the periphery of the nebula, giving further credence to the theory that whoever was behind the attack, wanted them to head into that direction.

The implications of being herded to a specific location concerned him, but not as much as staying in place and slowly being picked to death from an unknown source.

He looked up at the other two people in his ready room. Commander Star and Doctor Katanga.

The latter didn't look particularly comfortable at the intermittent rumbles which were shaking the ship, evidence that the veteran physician hadn't been assigned to starship duty in quite some time.

"So, Doctor, what have you learned?"

He didn't respond right away, instead he steadied himself against the bulkhead he was standing close to while the ship trembled once more. "Uh ... well ... the good news is that I was able to determine that whatever has affected Lieutenant Culsten, Katherine Smith and Louise Hopkins has also affected you."

Owens frowned. "How is that good news? And I wasn't aware Hopkins had been affected."

Star spoke up. "After receiving reports of the lieutenant's odd behavior just before the incident, I asked the Doctor to check her out on a hunch."

Owens nodded and glanced back towards Katanga. "Okay, so something or someone is controlling our crew? And you are saying I was affected as well. However, if you remember I didn't try to blow up the ship, Doctor."

"Not as far as we know, no."

The captain didn't see the humor.

Star stood forward before he could focus his ire on Katanga. "My theory is that whatever took hold of you and the others, started with you first. You were the first reported incident of this phenomenon."

"That makes sense," he said. "But we still don't know who, what or why."

"I'd be willing to go on a limb here and guess it is somehow related to these blasted..." Katanga stopped himself when the deck plates under his feet moved again, "with these ... attacks. Whatever the hell they are."

Michael stood and walked towards the viewport as if he could somehow gleam the enemy, which had eluded their sensors, with the naked eye. He gave up after just a few seconds and turned back to the others. "What do we know so far? I was affected somehow but we don't know to what end. Culsten tried to move the ship. Smith nearly caused the shields to fail and Hopkins came fairly close to destroying the entire ship."

"And now we're seemingly headed towards a certain point in the nebula."

"A certain point or out of it?" asked the doctor.

Star and Owens glanced his way.

"You said it yourself. Culsten tried to move the ship. Was he trying to get us out of it? Because isn't that where we are headed now?"

Star considered that for a moment. "And if the shields had failed, we would have been forced to leave. Not to mention that Hopkins' actions would have caused us to disappear quite permanently."

"Something wants us out of the nebula." Owens said what his officers were already thinking. "But why?"

The Trill looked towards her old friend. "Eli, have you been able to gleam anything else from your scans. Anything at all that could give us an idea who may have been behind taking over and controlling crewmembers?"

"Well, I did detected lower than normal serotonin levels in all cases. Nothing serious but it was what made me make the connection initially. That led me to find other brain wave irregularities which were so subtle, they did not show up on normal scans. But they could indicate some sort of intelligence, suppressing the victim's brain wave activity temporarily."

"An intelligence?" said Star. "Perhaps we're not dealing with a conventional enemy at all."

"Or an enemy for that matter," said Katanga.

"Whatever it is," said the captain, "it has already attempted to destroy us once before and I'd rather not give it another chance. We'll have to treat it as a hostile force for now."

"That's so very typically militaristic of you, Captain," said Katanga who still refused to wear his uniform jacket over his blue medical shirt.

Star shot Katanga a dark look.

"In case you hadn't noticed, Doctor," Owens said frostily, "we've been fighting a war over the last fourteen months. So you'll forgive me if I prefer to err on the side of caution when it comes to attacks on my ship."

The doctor raised a hand. "The safety of this ship and crew is paramount, I'm well aware of that. I'm just saying that we should keep an open mind here."

Before Owens could respond, Lieutenant Stanmore's voice sounded over the intercom. "*Bridge to Captain Owens.*"

Michael looked towards the doors leading to the bridge. "Go ahead, Lieutenant."

"*Sir, we're picking up some sort of signal.*"

"We'll be right there," Owens said and already headed for the doors, his two senior officers close behind.

Stanmore turned to them as soon as they emerged from the ready room. "It may be nothing at all, sir," he said a little contritely. "It doesn't seem to contain any kind of message and could be nothing more than background interference but it only showed up a minute ago."

"Put it on speakers," said Owens as he walked over to his chair and took a seat.

What they heard next was not much more than static. It lasted perhaps five seconds before it cut off again.

"Is that it? That's hardly worth calling a signal," said Katanga.

"It's too random to be background radiation, too precise in length," said the first officer and looked at the doctor. "Could it be that intelligence you were talking about? Could they be trying to communicate?"

But Katanga shrugged, clearly out of his element.

"Play it again," said Owens. "And run it through the computer. Get sciences on it, see if they can detect a pattern."

Star, who had taken a seat next to Owens, leaned over to him. "That could take awhile. Especially without Xylion on board," she whispered.

He nodded before he listened to the static-laden signal again.

"Captain, I believe I can detect a certain mathematical logic within the signal."

Both Owens and Star stood to turn and look at the Vulcan tactical officer, Lieutenant Trinik, who stood at Leva's usual post. He wasn't looking at his instruments but instead was concentrating on the nonsensical sounds coming over the speakers.

"Thank God for Vulcan ears," said Katanga.

Trinik played the signal one more time and then looked at his captain with a slight nod. "I am certain of it, sir."

"Good work," he said and turned to operations. "Mister Stanmore, see if you can highlight those qualities and suppress the static."

He went to work immediately. After he played it again, the sound had changed significantly. The static was much less prevalent and Owens could detect something else. A tone of some kind and it seemed almost melodious.

"Is that ... music?" said Katanga.

Star nodded. "Yes. And I've heard it before. Keep playing it."

The signal repeated in a loop and the more Owens heard, the clearer it seemed to become in his mind.

"Come unto these yellow sands, and then take hands'," Star said after a moment and then whipped around to look at the captain.

He smirked as he continued. "'Curtsied when you have and kissed the wild waves whist'."

"Is that Shakespeare?" Katanga said, clearly confused at hearing this within a nebula.

"It's Deen," said Star.

Owens took a couple of steps towards Stanmore's station. "Can you get a fix on the source of the signal, Lieutenant?"

"Not with complete accuracy, no. But I have a general direction," he said and then turned towards the captain. "It is coming from deeper within the nebula."

"They're in trouble," said Star.

Owens nodded. "If they're being attacked in a similar manner, the runabout's shields may not protect them as long as ours have."

"But if we turn around now, we may not be able to make it ourselves."

Katanga glared at Star. "We have to try. We're not going to leave our people behind."

Michael Owens took his seat and tugged down on his uniform jacket. "Agreed. Helm, set course towards the source of the signal. Best speed. Tactical, I need maximum power to shields. Get it from wherever you need to but keep them up. We need to make it to the runabout with enough time to spare to allow our own escape."

- III -

“Food production could be increased by at least 33% if we installed a more efficient irrigation scheme and created additional arable fields on the western and eastern ridges,” Xylion said as he surveyed some of the land near the settlement while reviewing a padd.

“You are probably correct,” said Tela who stayed close by his side and had in fact hardly ventured more than a few feet from him since he had set out to inspect the settlement in more detail. “But don’t you think this can wait? You haven’t even spent a whole day here yet and you are already looking at ways to improve things. Let me show you to your new home. Let me help you settle in before you commit yourself to work.”

He considered her curiously. “There is a great amount of work to be done in order to ensure the settlement remains viable.”

The young Vulcan nodded. “Of course. And I have no doubt that you have many ideas to ensure it will. But we have survived here for twenty-three years. I am certain waiting a few days to make improvements will have no ill-effects.”

“I disagree,” he said. “We are already aware of elements within this settlement which are not only behaving illogically but destructively. It is imperative that we implement changes swiftly for the well-being of the settlement and its residents.”

“You speak of the attack on your former crewmember.”

“Yes.”

She looked off into the distance for a moment, into the general direction of where until that morning the Starfleet runabout had been stranded. “They are gone, Xylion. And with them the factors which most likely have contributed to that unfortunate incident.”

“Regardless of the motivation for the attack, I am convinced that it reveals an inherent instability within this colony which could be a symptom of a much more dangerous underlying trend.”

“You really believe we might revert back to our more basic and violent nature?”

He offered a minuscule node. “We should not rule out the possibility that some colonists may de-evolve in such a manner. But I need to carry out further research before I can be entirely certain of the

root causes and if they truly present a significant danger. The sooner I can do this, the better chance the colony has for survival.”

She nodded slowly without looking at him directly.

“I also still wish to locate the person or persons responsible for the attack on Ensign Srena.”

This caused her to focus back on him. “For what purpose?”

“Those actions were criminal. The guilty parties must be found. A society, even one as small as this, must have a functioning criminal justice system in order to maintain order. And if the individuals responsible require medial attention, it is even more imperative that they are located. It will also assist my research to question the perpetrators and learn their motivations.”

“I understand.”

Xylion raised an eyebrow, not missing her subtle reservations. “Tela, if you recall it was your suggestion which prompted me to consider this matter in the first place. You were the one to mention the possibility that elements of the settlement were no longer following Surak’s teachings. It was you who feared what this might mean for the future of the settlement.”

She nodded, almost absent mindedly as she kept her gaze far away.

“I trust that you did not raise those possibilities simply as a strategy to convince me to stay here.”

At that she quickly glanced back on him. “Of course not.”

Xylion’s face remained hard. Neutral to most observers but those who knew him well may have been able to detect the barest hint of skepticism around his eyes.

“I meant what I said. I truly did. When I was a child I read about pre-Surak Vulcans. About the manner in which they lived and nearly destroyed each other before they turned towards logic. I care for this settlement and my people. I do not wish for the same fate to befall them here.”

When Xylion didn’t speak and instead simply continued to consider her, she continued.

“But you can also not deny a certain ... attraction between the two of us. Surely. We are Vulcan of course but we also love, do we not? And we consume those notions.”

Another raised eyebrow was the only response she received.

She took a small step closer to him and then looking for his hand which she took in hers with little resistance. "Isn't it also logical that this settlement cannot survive without continued procreation?" she said, looking deep into his eyes.

"Vulcan procreation is achieved through the *pon farr* and takes place only once every seven years. Neither of us is currently experiencing that stage."

Tela took a step closer so that their bodies were mere inches apart now. "But there are exceptions to this, are there not? In cases such as this where reproduction is essential to survival."

"Yes. However your logic is flawed. The immediate survival of the settlement due to a lack of offspring is not yet at stake," he said and took a step backwards.

Her lips nearly formed a smile. "But you have not denied my assertion regarding the attraction that exists between us."

"Tela," he began, sounding much more softly than usual. "You are still very young and as you have correctly pointed out before, I have only just joined your community. Vulcan mating rituals can take many years to develop. I recommend patience in this matter."

"I do not wish to be patient," she said, almost pouting now.

"Consider it my first lesson on understanding Vulcan ways."

The frown on her beautiful young face was difficult to miss. Then she turned suddenly, looking back towards the settlement. "My father has assembled the rest of the colony. We should go and meet them," she said and headed off.

Xylion wasn't entirely certain how she had been able to determine this, he had heard no announcement or signal to that effect. He followed her nevertheless.

- IV -

Over the years commanding his ship, Michael Owens had gotten to know it well enough to be able to read it by its feel, by the way the deck plates rattled under his feet and by the manner in which the bulkheads vibrated around him. He had learned to know how his ship was doing by the sounds it made, the hums and groans of the superstructure usually gave him a good idea of the status of the starship. And he knew it was hurting.

The flashing red alert beacons and the constant jolting as *Eagle* dove deeper into the nebula were ever present reminders but they didn't tell the entire story. Something was out there to destroy the Starfleet vessel and with every mile, the ship was coming closer to that fate.

Owens had to force himself from grinding his teeth together as he felt another angry jolt through the cushion of his command seat. "How much longer?"

Stanmore at ops responded. "We are no longer detecting the signal but judging from its last transmission, we should be getting into visual range any moment now."

"On screen," said Commander Star who, perhaps slightly unwisely, remained on her feet between her chair next to Owens' and the forward stations. So far she was doing an admirable job of keeping her balance.

The captain shook his head when all he could spot on the screen was that nebula.

"Is it just me or does this place look a lot more unwelcoming than it used to?" said Ensign Aliris who was currently in charge of piloting the ship.

Owens had to agree with the young Risian woman. What had not too long ago appeared like a marvelous natural phenomenon, dazzling with its wide variety of color and light had somehow become an angry, throbbing mass, apparently determined to put an end to his ship and crew. And yet the nebula hadn't really changed in appearance, it just felt as if it had decided to put all its splendor to one single, destructive goal.

"I certainly vote to cut our little excursion short at our earliest convenience," said Katanga. The doctor was hanging on tightly to his chair to the left of the captain. "This place seems to have lost a lot of its charm recently."

"Wait, what is that," Star said, took a step closer to the main screen and pointed at an area in the lower left quadrant. "Enhance grid gamma-six."

Stanmore had the requested section highlighted with little delay and then expanded to fill the screen.

Owens smirked when he spotted the familiar hull configuration of a Starfleet *Danube*-class runabout.

The operations officer tapped a few more panels until the small vessel took up almost the entire viewer. "It's the *Nebuchadrezzar*," he said, sounding noticeably relieved.

"She appears to be in trouble," said Star, noticing her unusual angle and apparent lack of proper forward momentum.

Stanmore confirmed. "She's adrift."

"Hail her."

Lieutenant Trinik carried out the order. "No response, sir. The vessel appears to have taken significant damage consistent with an unintentional landing."

"A landing?" Katanga said, befuddled. "Where would it have landed?"

"Questions for later," said Owens. "Helm, bring us in closer."

"Aye, sir," said Aliris.

"Scan for life signs," said the first officer, beating the captain to the exact same order by less than a second.

"There are three life signs," said Katanga who was using a console positioned within arm's length of his chair. "One is very weak and will require immediate medical attention."

"Doctor, prepare—"

"Already on my way," the physician said before Owens could even complete the order and was on his feet, talking to his staff in sickbay before he had even reached the turbolift doors.

Under different circumstances Michael would have been annoyed by Katanga's tendency to cut him off in mid-sentence but right now he appreciated the man's dedication to his craft. He focused back on the image of the battered and bruised ship on the screen, unable to hide the

concern for his crewmembers on board and fully aware that the away team had numbered four souls instead of the three they'd been able to detect. He couldn't help but fear the worst.

Star had moved behind Stanmore, holding on to the back of his chair to keep her balance. "Lieutenant, can you attempt to send a comm. signal on the same frequency as the one on which they send their distress signal? That way, perhaps we can talk to them."

The young officer needed a moment to understand and then nodded. "Theoretically that should be possible," he said. "That frequency was not designed to handle audio-visual communications but if I boost the power to our transmitter it should be possible."

"Do it," she said.

In the meantime Owens turned to his tactical officer. "Can we beam the life-signs directly to sickbay?" he asked but already suspecting the answer was not going to be encouraging. As if to stress the complications of their situation, the ship jolted again from another attack, reminding him and the rest of the crew that the invisible assault which had intensified since they had pushed deeper into Aphrodite's Cloud had no intentions to let up any time soon.

"We are not able to get a transporter lock through the interference generated by the nebula's radiation. I would also not recommend to lower the shields at this time," the Vulcan replied efficiently. "Severe damage to the outer hull would be a likely result."

Stanmore turned from his station to glance at Star and then Owens. "Channel open, sir."

"*Eagle to Nebuchadrezzar, do you read?*" the captain said.

There was no reply.

"Boost power to the receiver," ordered the first officer.

Stanmore did as he was told. "Done. Any more and we blow it out."

"This is Owens, *Nebuchadrezzar*, please respond?"

The sound of static was all he got in return.

"*Nebuchadrezzar, say again.*"

Another burst of static but this time there was something more. A voice buried deep within the electronic white noise was trying to push through. After a moment it took on a familiar and very pleasant female voice. "*I see you got my ... message.*"

Owens smirked. He felt a sense of immense relief to hear DeMara's voice and then immediately berated himself for his own feelings. His close friend was alive and well, it appeared, but clearly the same could not be said for all the members of the away team. "Admittedly we don't get many communiqués in song format so it took us a moment to figure it out."

"That's a real shame. I always thought it be a much better universe if people broke out in song more often."

Michael stood. "I'll make sure to bring it up with the Dominion next time I get the chance. What's your status, Lieutenant?"

"Ensign Srena has been injured and requires immediate medical attention. I don't suppose you can lock on to her and beam her straight to sickbay?"

"Not an option while we're in this nebula, I'm afraid."

"Shuttle bay, then?" Deen said. *"But you need to bring us in, we've lost the ability to maneuver."*

The captain glanced at the tactical officer. "Can we lower shields long enough to bring in the runabout?"

"It is not a recommended procedure given our circumstances," he said.

Michael frowned and just for a short moment had the urge to snap at the junior lieutenant and to let him know that he didn't care about procedures while the life of one of his crew was in serious danger. He quickly remembered that the young man was simply doing his job, albeit a little too pragmatically. Even for a Vulcan.

"Sir," said So'Dan Leva over the comlink. *"It may be possible for you to create a second shield envelope around the runabout then drop the inner shields and bring us in."*

Owens nodded, immediately being reminded why the half-Romulan was the ship's senior tactical officer. He glanced towards Star and she quickly headed towards the tactical station to assist the Vulcan officer there.

"That's what we'll do, Commander. Stand ready," said the captain and then looked at the Risian at helm. "Ensign, bring us in range and then align us with the runabout."

"Aye, sir," she said quickly and went to work.

Owens took his seat again while the crew around him prepared the ship to take the runabout on board under less than optimal

conditions. A quick glance at the status displays embedded in the armrests of his chair were not encouraging. Shields were already below sixty percent power and the double envelope would only drain them even quicker. It was a risky move, he understood, but it was their only option. "Divert auxiliary power to structural integrity," he said and then looked at Stanmore acknowledging the order and making it happen.

"We're ready, sir," said Star from the tactical board behind him. "We will be particularly vulnerable during the maneuver however and we are likely to take additional damage."

He nodded and then activated a panel on his armrest console. "Bridge to all hands, brace yourselves," he said and then looked up and toward Star, giving her the nod to proceed.

"Engaging secondary shield envelope," said the tactical officer.

"Activating tractor beam," this from Stanmore.

On the screen an azure energy beam took hold of the drifting runabout and began to pull her towards *Eagle*.

"Lowering main shields," said Star.

And as if on cue, the ship was immediately gripped by a shockwave and everyone on the bridge had to hold on for dear life as their unknown assailants had somehow detected their weakening prey and taken full advantage.

"Report" Owens said.

"Outer shields down to twelve percent. Hull damage to deck seven, eight and nine."

"Evacuate the affected areas and initiate radiation protocols," Owens said even as he typed commands into his armrest console. "Status of the *Nebuchadrezzar*?"

"The attack seems to have been focused on us, sir," said Star. "Shuttle bay doors are opening."

"Small miracles," he said. "Reel her in."

On the screen the runabout disappeared as it was being pulled passed the visual pickup angle of the sensors.

Another jolt followed the first, this one even more violent. The helm station erupted in sparks and Aliris went flying out of her chair with a grunt.

"The outer shield envelope has collapsed," said Star urgently.

"Hull breach on deck seven, section nine. Emergency force-fields are in place," the Vulcan added, keeping his voice much more neutral.

Owens' first instinct was to check on the downed helmsman but as much as he wanted to, she simply wasn't a priority at the moment. With no shields to protect the ship and crew, everybody was at grave risk now. Not to mention that by opening the main shuttle bay doors, the very innards of *Eagle* now lay vulnerable and exposed. "Whatever it takes, bring main shields back online."

Stanmore was shaking his head as his hands were furiously racing over his console. "I cannot keep the tractor beam and the shields running at the same time."

Owens looked at the two officers behind him. "How much longer until we have the runabout?"

"About thirty seconds," Star said.

In other words a lifetime under current conditions. All it took was a lucky shot to their vulnerable shuttle bay to cause catastrophic damage to the ship. "Cut the beam, bring them in under their own momentum and give me back my shields."

"Tractor beam disabled," said Stanmore.

"Shields coming up," said Star.

That's when Owens saw the mass of light in the corner of the main view screen. It looked just like those little specks of colorful light they had witnessed in this nebula ever since they had arrived except that this one was at least three to four times larger than anything he had seen before. And instead of shining in soothing colorful lights, this one was pulsing angrily in a glaring red. It was on a collision course with his ship.

"Brace for impact," he said.

It did him little good.

The thing hit with a bright flash and for a moment Michael felt as if time itself had slowed. His first thought was that the artificial gravity had failed, as he suddenly felt weightless. It lasted for but a heartbeat before he was reminded that gravity was working all too well, slamming him onto the floor with unforgiving force.

* * *

“They’ve cut the tractor beam,” said Deen unable to keep a slight hint of concern out of her voice after their tether to *Eagle* had been severed. “We’re moving on momentum only.”

Leva nodded, almost as if he had expected this. “They are having trouble keeping the shields up. And whatever is going after the ship has apparently noticed the weakness. Transfer all power we’ve got left to thrusters and inertial dampers, including life support.”

The Tenarian went to work but a grimace gave proof that she wasn’t having much success. “There isn’t much.”

Leva looked up to see the wide-open shuttle bay doors. But they were coming in much too fast with little to no control. At this speed there was a good chance the already weakened runabout hull would split open upon impact like an egg, most likely killing everybody on board. “We don’t need much. Just a couple of thruster burst to slow us down.”

“I can give you one.”

“I’ll take it. Dump the warp core, all anti-matter and fuel,” said the half-Romulan and then looked back up from his controls to the viewport. The shuttle bay had been cleared of all equipment and personnel as a preventive measure but with all power diverted to protecting the ship from an external attack, the systems usually designed to prevent a hard landing and safeguard the runabout did not appear fully functioning.

“Oh, this is not good.”

It took him a moment to realize that Deen wasn’t talking about their imminent crash landing but about events taking place outside in the nebula. Leva had only a few seconds to register that some sort of energy was building up just a few short kilometers from their position, preparing for a devastating strike against *Eagle*. And that it was coming right for them.

He had planned to use what little energy they had left for the thrusters to slow their approach enough to not break up the runabout on impact. Things had changed in a heartbeat as a seemingly much more urgent threat had emerged. Without giving it more thought than necessary he engaged the thrusters to carry out an emergency evasive maneuver.

The runabout swerved sharply to avoid the incoming energy discharge.

Leva's fingers turned white as he pushed down hard on the control panels, trying to force the runabout back towards the waiting shuttle bay.

"Brace!" he shouted when he realized that they were coming in on an entirely wrong angle, now moving sideways towards their landing coordinates.

Deen and Leva lowered their heads and covered them with their arms just before they made contact.

The impact was bone jarring and both went flying out of their seats. The screech of metal against metal was nearly unbearable as the runabout appeared to try and drive itself into the shuttle bay deck.

"Hold on!" Leva cried as he realized that their momentum would not only push the ship across the entire length of the bay, it would not remain upright for long.

A hard jolt and the screaming sound of metal rendered into scrap was the first sign that the hull had been compromised. The second was *Nebuchadrezzar's* starboard warp nacelle hitting the viewports, cracking them thoroughly, before it bounced off the frame and went flying out towards space.

Then the runabout flipped to its side and both Leva and Deen hung on for dear life when the artificial gravity net was unable to compensate for the ship flipping over and rolling across the bay, shedding hull plates and other equipment as it went.

It flipped back right side up just in time for its nose to smash into the rear bulkhead, causing both officers to collide painfully with the forward control console of the cockpit.

An eerie quiet settled across the shuttle bay.

"We need to stop landing this way," said Deen in-between coughs.

Leva couldn't help but laugh, even though his entire body punished him for this sudden onset of humor.

Then the door to the cockpit opened and a team of medical personnel streamed inside, Elijah Katanga leading the charge.

The African doctor had quickly determined that Leva had been injured more severely and knelt at his side in an instant. "You have a broken arm and multiple fractured ribs but overall I'd say you got lucky."

Nurse Leeta was tending to Deen. "Mostly bruises as far as I can tell, Lieutenant," she said and smiled at the Tenarian.

But Deen shook her head. "It's not me," she said and tried to stand even though the nurse was doing her best to discourage her moving at all. Deen managed to get on her feet regardless and began to head towards the exit.

"Where are you going?" Leeta said.

"Ensign Srena," she said over her shoulder. "Quickly, she needs urgent medical attention."

Katanga left his medics to care for Leva and followed Deen and Leeta towards the back.

The Tenarian was glad that they'd had the foresight of strapping the injured ensign tightly to her bunk where she had remained securely when they arrived in the aft compartment.

Leeta referred to her medical tricorder. "Reading multiple internal injuries as well as a subdural hematoma. Her heart-rate is dangerously unstable."

Katanga had already tapped his combadge. "Sickbay, prep an immediate surgical bay for high priority patient with a subdural hematoma. Prepare for emergency transport."

"Yes, Doctor, right away."

That's when Srena's blue eyelids fluttered opened. "Dee?"

"Doctor, she's coming out of the coma," Leeta said urgently.

Deen was at her side in an instance. "It's alright, Srena, you're back on *Eagle*. You're going to be fine now, just rest."

"Dee ... the nebula..."

"Don't try to talk, you're going to be alright."

Leeta pushed Deen away gently to get closer to the patient and inject her with a hypospray, causing the Andorian's eyelids to slowly close again. "She's stable enough for transport."

Katanga nodded. "Transporter room, three to beam directly to sickbay."

"Energizing," responded the voice of the transporter operator.

"Alive," Srena mumbled just before she, along with Leeta and Katanga dematerialized in a stream of azure light.

Tela had lead Xylion into the colony's most central building, which was made up of the bulk of the transport ship which had remained after it had crashed on this world over two decades earlier. And just like she had said, every single resident had assembled in the large cargo bay turned meeting hall, with Volik, Tela's father and town elder standing at the very front on a slightly raised platform.

The room was poorly lit in Xylion's opinion. With no windows or other openings, the sole source of light was provided by a number of torches set up at the corner of the room, allowing long shadows to dissect the assembly hall.

Volik spoke almost as soon as Xylion had entered. "Most of you have already met Mister Xylion who has graciously accepted our offer to join our settlement on this world and who has shown great interest in helping us find ways in which to grow the colony and ensure it remains healthy and stable."

The crowd barely reacted to this, other than to turn and look towards their newest member. Those standing closest to him took a step backwards to allow him more room.

"Xylion," Volik continued, speaking directly to the science officer. "On the behalf of the colony, please accept our gratitude for your decision to join us. I am convinced that with your help, we will ensure that we will continue to prosper on this world which has become a home to all of us."

He wanted to point out that his decision to join them had been in part achieved by rather dubious and un-Vulcan manners. That it hadn't been his choice initially to stay behind. He didn't regret that choice but he also couldn't deny that it simply hadn't been his to make. Nor could he forget that this was yet another symptom of what ailed this colony and what he hoped he could cure by his presence and his teachings.

"Perhaps now would be a good time for you to address the colony, Xylion, in order to clarify the role which you will assume here. Please, join me," said the elder.

Xylion moved towards the dais without hesitation, the crowd easily parting for him as he went. He stepped up next to Volik and faced the dozens of Vulcans assembled here. "There are many reason why I

have come to be here amongst you today," he said and found Tela looking up at him from the crowd. He couldn't be certain but she looked almost guilty. Xylion of course didn't believe in the human custom of mincing words. But on this occasion he believed in diplomacy and he thought it to be in poor taste to accuse his now fellow colonists of blackmail on his first day. "As to my role as part of this settlement, I have identified three critical points. One: Assist in making the colony more productive in the ways in which we apply agriculture, construction and infrastructure in order to ensure continued growth and stability. Two: Re-introduce the *Kir' Shara* and Surak's teachings and commence lectures which each member of the settlement may attend and finally third: Commence an investigation into the attack on Ensign Srena, locate the guilty parties and bring them to justice."

There was a murmur going through the crowd and Xylion couldn't immediately determine which of his three points had caused this unexpected reaction. He glanced to his side to find Volik who was quick to assist.

The elder Vulcan raised both his arms. "Please, people, settle down," he said and the crowd reacted immediately as they stopped whispering to each other and focused on Volik instead. "All of Xylion's proposals have great merit and are undoubtedly crucial long-term goals for our continued prosperity."

Xylion raised an eyebrow to this. He didn't consider any of his proposals as merely long-term goals. In fact he wished to commence putting each into practice with immediate effect.

"For now, of course," Volik continued, "we have much more pressing concerns we need to discuss," he said and found his daughter in the crowd. "Tela, please join us."

The woman offered a quick nod and then stepped up on the stage and next to Xylion who was still not certain what matters could be more important at this moment in time.

"It is with the great joy of a father as well as of the leader of our settlement to be able to administer the first joining between two of our own in a great many years. We all wish them a prosperous and fruitful future. Their consummation will ensure the offspring which will guarantee the continued existence of our colony."

The crowd nodded with agreement.

“Volik, this is most irregular,” said Xylion, having been blindsided by this sudden development.

“It mustn’t be,” he said. “After all you are fond of my daughter, are you not? You find her pleasing?”

“That is not the issue.”

“It is for the good of the settlement.”

Xylion considered the older Vulcan for a moment. It wasn’t difficult to tell that he was set on this marriage to go ahead. He looked towards the crowd which seemed just as keen to see him accept Tela as his wife. And the young Vulcan woman was perhaps the most eager, judging by her almost brimming eyes.

“If you will excuse me,” he finally said.

“Where are you going?” Tela said.

“I shall retreat to my room to meditate,” he said simply and headed for the exit, this time the crowd much less willing to part before him.

- VI -

"Damage report," Star barked as she picked herself up from the floor. There was no immediate response on the darkened bridge and it took her a moment to realize why that was. Nobody was at their station. The Risian pilot was still sprawled out on the deck, dead or unconscious, Star wasn't sure. Stanmore sat slumped over the operations console but at least he was stirring slightly, meaning that he was still alive. She couldn't see Trinik. Her first concern was for the captain however and she felt immense relieve when she spotted him, just a few feet from his chair, attempting to stand.

She nearly jumped to his side to help him up. "Captain, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," he said but was cut off by a coughing fit, no doubt brought on by the smoke and fumes of burned-out plastics now filling the air. Star helped him sit in his chair and he quickly waved her off. "Check on the others and then give me a damage report."

She nodded and attended to Aliris first. She found a steady pulse but she was bleeding from her forehead and was clearly unconscious. "Bridge to sickbay, medical emergency. Get somebody up here on the double," she said and didn't wait for a response as she moved on to operations.

"This is sickbay, a team is already en-route."

Star carefully pulled Stanmore off the console and back into his chair. "Lieutenant?"

He nodded slowly. "I'm okay, I think. Just got the wind knocked out of me," he said, attempting to sound nonchalant.

When she turned to look towards tactical she could see that Trinik was back at his board. There was green blood trickling down his mouth and nose but it didn't seem to slow him down. "We have suffered a direct hit to deck eight. With additional damage reported to deck twelve, fifteen and sixteen. I am reading multiple hull breaches. Emergency force fields have engaged. Sickbay is reporting multiple injuries on various decks. No fatalities have been reported however three crewmembers are currently unaccounted for."

"Do we have ... do we have the runabout?" Owens said.

Stanmore responded. "We have it, sir."

The ship jolted once more.

"Status of shields?" Star said.

"Thirty-two percent," the Vulcan said.

She looked towards the captain and immediately knew what he was thinking. Was it enough to get them out of the nebula in one piece?

He pointed at the helm. "Commander, get us out of here, full impulse."

Star didn't hesitate and took the chair behind the conn. It had been a while since she had steered a starship but it came back to her as quickly as riding a bicycle. The ship was facing the wrong direction after they had turned it to align with the incoming runabout. It took only a moment to fire the thruster and have the bow facing the quickest route out of the nebula again. But when she fired up the impulse engine she realized that it wasn't giving her nearly enough power. She shook her head in frustration. "Impulse engines are operating at forty percent efficiency only."

"Owens to engineering, we need more power to the engines."

Hopkins was on the line momentarily. *"I see what I can do but we've taken a lot of damage, sir. We have multiple overloaded or damaged EPS conduits and we were still affecting repairs from the damage we've taken a few days ago. Most of our system are running on emergency power at the moment."*

"Prioritize impulse engines and shields. We need to try and get out of the nebula. All other repairs can wait until we're clear."

"Understood, sir. Hopkins out."

The forward turbolift doors opened to allow DeMara Deen to step onto the bridge along with a medical team which quickly tended to the fallen Aliris and the other injured.

"Dee," Owens said and stood on shaky legs. "Are you alright?"

"Felt better but I think I'll pull through," she said with a smirk.

"What happened?"

"Long story. Srena took the worst of it. She's in sickbay," she said and didn't miss that Lance Stanmore turned to look at her at the mention of the Andorian pilot, deep worry lines crossing his brow and she quickly recalled what she had said about the young operations officer and how they had only recently started seeing each other. "I sure she'll be alright."

He gave her an appreciative nod even though his concern was clearly not completely alleviated. He turned back to his station to distract himself with his work.

"What about the others?" Owens said.

"Leva has a broken arm. He should be back on his feet soon."

"Xylion?"

She didn't respond to that straight away. "He's still on the planet."

Star stood from the helm after handing it off to another crewman. "What planet?"

"As I said, it's a long story," she said and then nearly lost her balance when the ship was struck yet again.

"Shields down to twenty-six percent," Trinik said.

"Doesn't look like we have time for stories," said Deen. "Where do you want me?"

"Ideally sickbay," said Owens. "But we could use an extra hand up here if you're up to it."

She offered a sharp nod and then headed for the science station.

Star turned towards Petty Officer Waldorf at the helm. The middle-aged NCO was usually in charge of piloting the ship during the night shift and it didn't escape her notice that with Culsten restricted to quarters, as to her own orders, and both Srena and Aliris incapacitated, they were growing thin at that position. She made a mental note to get some backup to the bridge as soon as possible. "How long until we clear the nebula, Mister?"

"Impulse engine is not yet fully restored. At current speed we won't clear it for at least another hour."

Star glanced at Trinik next and she didn't have to put her question into words.

"At the present rate of attack, shields will last another sixteen minutes and twelve seconds before total collapse," he said. "I will attempt to divert additional power but it is unlikely that we will be able to keep the grid energized until we are free of the nebula."

"And we're not even sure yet if the attack is in fact linked to Aphrodite. For all we know it might be something else entirely which will keep attacking us until the ship is destroyed," said the captain. "We need to find out what we're up against."

Star noticed that Deen was hard at work at the science station. She was fully aware that the young woman had a solid science background even if she was the ship's operations officer. "Lieutenant, any thoughts?"

"Maybe," she said. "How long has the ship been under attack?"

Owens took that one. "It's been nearly five hours now. On and off. It seemed to lessen when we were headed towards the boundary of the nebula and it picked up again when we headed deeper into it."

"And we had multiple instances of crewmembers acting erratically over the last few days, purposefully attempting to damage the ship. Lieutenant Gedar was killed," said Star but then regretted mentioning the engineer's death when she spotted Deen's shocked reaction, forgetting for a moment that she must have known him quite well as they had been in the play together.

Owens had left his chair to head towards Deen and then placed a hand on her shoulder. She knew what he was doing. They needed her focused on the problem at hand and not distracted with the death of a fellow officer.

Deen looked up at the captain.

"You mentioned you had some ideas?" he said.

It took her a moment to recover. "Actually it's something Srena said. She's been spending some time studying the nebula and she may have found something," Deen said and then turned back to the science station. Star noticed that she was setting up an interface with the runabout computer. The small vessel was in a worse shape than her mother ship but fortunately the computer core was still active and it didn't take Deen long to get access to its main memory circuits. "At first I thought what she said was that she was glad that she was still alive but now I think she meant to say that the nebula itself is alive."

"You think the nebula is a life form?" said Owens.

"It wouldn't be the strangest thing we've seen," she said as she went through the runabout's computer to try and find the research Srena had been doing.

Star had a sudden thought and turned to tactical. "Trinik, give me the visual sensor readouts just before the latest attack. Directly aft, from where the attack originated."

The Vulcan had the requested data up in an instance and transferred it onto the main view screen to show what the sensors had

picked up just a few minutes earlier. A large ball of crimson energy, the size of a shuttlecraft was pulsing with what appeared to be massive amounts of pure energy just a few short kilometers from the ship. It accelerated suddenly towards *Eagle* where it hit the shields with such force the visual pickup blinked out.

"Go back and freeze the image on the object," said Star.

The screen turned back on to show the pulsing mass of light.

"That looks familiar," said Owens.

Star nodded. "Because we've seen it before. In fact we've seen it everywhere we've looked. Lieutenant, maximum magnification on the outer edge of the object."

The screen zoomed in to reveal dozens of smaller specks of light racing towards the larger one to create the phenomenon which had attacked the ship.

"I think those are our life forms," said Deen and then turned back towards the science station. "That's what Srena was talking about. She believed those specks of light we've seen in the nebula are sentient."

"But why are they attacking us?" asked Stanmore from the operations console.

"They must see us as a threat," said Deen. "After all we've invaded their home."

"And they may have already tried to communicate with us," said the first officer. "Perhaps to warn us."

Owens turned to look at the Trill. "Explain?"

"It's just a theory of course, but consider the evidence. They made contact with you first. Logically really, seeing that you are the captain. When this failed they became more and more desperate, eventually leading to attempts to destroy the ship, first from within and now from without."

Deen seemed in agreement as she nodded along. "I think the commander is right. These are all signs of an intelligence at work. A life form quite possibly trying to defend itself."

Eagle trembled hard as it was hit yet again. All three officers were forced to hang on in order as not to lose their balance.

"Shields now down to eighteen percent," Trinik said.

"Alright," said Owens, "so we're dealing with some sort of incorporeal life form currently dead set on seeing us destroyed. And

they want us out of the nebula. But we're already on our way and yet they're still attacking us."

"They've become desperate," said Deen.

Star nodded. "We need to find a way to communicate with them, to let them know that we are no threat and that we are happy to leave the nebula."

The turbolift doors opened, this time to deposit Katanga onto the bridge. The doctor was still wearing his surgical gear. He spotted the three senior officers assembled around the science station and headed their way.

"Doctor, how's the crew?" said Owens. "What's Ensign Srena's condition?"

"No fatalities, thank the Maker. The ensign is going to pull through as well. In fact she's the reason I'm up here. When she came to for a short while she made me promise I come up here and tell you about her theory that the nebula is home of ..." he stopped himself when he noticed the readouts on the science station. "Ah, I can see you already figured it out."

"Thanks to Srena's analysis," said Deen. "We need to find a way to communicate with them."

"I take it just opening a hailing channel is not going to do it," said Katanga.

Deen shook her head. "They are free floating, incorporeal life forms. They are likely to have just as little facilities to pick up subspace radio signals as we would without any equipment."

"But they are able to temporarily inhabit a corporeal body and use it for their purposes," said Star. "We may be able to communicate with them in that manner."

"I'm not sure I like that idea very much," said Katanga.

Another hard jolt nearly caused Katanga to the floor had it not been for Star catching him in time. "I don't think we have much of a choice at this point," she said.

"You want to allow an alien life form we practically know nothing about access to one of our bodies to do with them who knows what? We don't even know what kind of long-term effects this could have on the host body," said the doctor, clearly not willing to sign off on this plan even given the deteriorating circumstances.

“Doctor, you have thoroughly examined everyone we believe to have been taken over by these life forms, including myself, and found no ill-effects, isn’t that right?” said Owens.

“Yes but we don’t know about long-term –”

But Star cut him off. “We’re explorers, right?” she said and looked at Owens. “This is the core of what we are all about. Making contact with new forms of life is why we’re out here in the first place. Not only do we have an opportunity to do so now, our own lives may very much depend on us doing so successfully. I volunteer.”

“I still think this is a terrible idea,” he said and then continued before Star could interrupt again. “But fair enough, I can see why we may not have an alternative at the moment. But you’re not a good choice, Dez,” he said, using the name of her previous host. “From what we’ve seen, these life forms prefer a body with low serotonin levels. That’s not you. Our best bet is to go with somebody we know has already been taken over. Their levels should still be fairly low and I could lower them a little further temporarily to make them even more appealing. But it would have to be a short session. And I would have to monitor that person throughout the process.”

“Then I’ll do it,” said Owens.

Star immediately shook her head. “Sir, that’s too dangerous.”

“Besides,” said Katanga. “Your possession, if you will, took place ten days ago which means your serotonin levels are nearly back to normal. It would be easier if we picked somebody with a more recent experience.”

Owens nodded reluctantly. “Alright, who do you suggest? It can’t be Hopkins, we’ll need her in engineering.”

The first officer tapped her combadge. “Star to Lieutenant Culsten,” she said and then looked at Owens who offered a nod of agreement, letting her know to go ahead.

“Culsten here, sir.”

“Lieutenant, I believe I still owe you an apology. In return would you mind terribly in helping us save the ship?”

“Tell me what you need.”

- VII -

Xylion had been assigned a small hut in the settlement which wasn't much more than a single room with a cot, a chest as well as a table and a couple of chairs. It was of course more than sufficient for him. It wasn't the spartanly furnished accommodations that concerned him but the odd behavior of the settlers. At first he had attributed Tela's interest in him as nothing more than some sort of physical attraction exasperated by her youth and her lack of Vulcan mental discipline. But the fact that Vorik, her father and a Vulcan elder, seemed to be as insistent that he not only marry his daughter but also procreate as soon as possible was unlikely and unexpected. Regardless how living in isolation had affected many of the younger Vulcans over the years, Volik was clearly a man who had spent a great amount of time following pragmatic Vulcan ways and so his illogical behavior was much more difficult to reconcile.

And then of course there were the many other oddities about the settlement he had come across. He had of course noticed the lack of children which seemed strange considering Volik's resolve on preserving the future of the settlement. The most likely explanation could have been some sort of sterility which had affected the male Vulcans but initial scans did not support that theory.

A knock on the door of his hut interrupted his considerations.

"Come."

The door opened and Tela slowly stepped inside. "Xylion, may I enter?"

"Certainly."

She set foot into the cabin only very gingerly, almost as if she wasn't sure if she were welcome here. "I have come to apologize for my father's behavior."

"Indeed?"

"It was not right of him to announce our marriage in such a way without discussing the matter with you first," she said.

"Agreed," said Xylion and stood.

"Especially since you had already indicated previously that you had no intentions of taking me as your wife."

"It had been a premature decision considering that we had only just met at the time."

She nodded. "But now you have joined our settlement."

"Is your father pressuring you to bond with me?"

She quickly shook her head and stepped closer. "Not at all. This is my decision. I wish to become your wife."

"Even though you have known me for only a very short time?"

"I understand that marriages on Vulcan are usually prearranged during childhood. We do not have that same option here."

He offered a minuscule nod to accede to that point. "True. But regardless, you must understand that what you are proposing is highly uncommon in most societies. It is much more customary to allow some time for two people to get to know each other before proposing marriage. This in turn will ensure maximum compatibility between the betrothed parties."

"But is it not proper to be wed before procreation?" she said.

His eyebrow climbed towards the ceiling. "You wish to procreate?"

"For the good of the settlement."

"The future of the settlement does not depend on our procreation at this time."

She didn't seem to have an answer to that. Instead she took another step closer. When Xylion didn't seem to react to this gesture, she placed the palm of her hand onto his chest and looked up at him. "How long has it been since you have been with a woman?"

"I do not understand the relevance of that question."

She pushed herself even closer. "Do you not find me attractive? Do you not wish to have my body?"

Xylion reached out for her and she closed her eyes when he touched her shoulder and his hand moved towards her neck. Then they opened wide suddenly when she felt a sudden pinch.

Tela went slack and Xylion grabbed her before she could fall. "I apologize for having to take this action, however your behavior is leading me to believe that you are not being entirely honest with me," he said as he carefully placed her onto the floor and sat her up against the bed. He considered her peaceful features for a moment. "I must also apologize for what I must do next. I believe that neither you nor the other settlers have provided me with satisfactory answers and I am

convinced that you are keeping information which may be vital to our survival," he said and reached out for her face. He spread his fingers and then carefully touched her in various places near her nose, temple and cheekbone to initiate a mind meld.

This was not something he did lightly. But the evidence had been mounting that something was very wrong with the settlement and the Vulcans who lived here and Tela's latest, illogical behavior had given him enough reason to attempt such drastic action.

It had been a long time since he had attempted a meld and the first time he had done so without the other person's permission. It was of course an intrusive procedure, an assault on another being's mind and privacy. Xylion saw no other option.

He closed his eyes as he concentrated on making contact with her mind. Not knowing what he would find there, he probed very slowly, intending to be as non-intrusive as possible. In the unlikely event that Tela had spoken the truth he didn't wish to hurt her or invade her privacy more than was absolutely necessary.

He met resistance almost immediately and it surprised him. A mind like Tela's with no learned Vulcan disciplines should have opened up to him like a book, especially considering her current state of unconsciousness. Instead he found something very much aware and ready to defend itself. And more than that, something immensely powerful.

His curiosity getting the better of him, he decided to dig deeper and push harder and past those initial defenses to see what lurked beneath the surface.

It took a great deal of effort, sweat pearls began dripping into his eyes and he could feel his own concentration slipping. And yet he pushed on.

He found recent memories of hers most of which were clearly focused on him. The most prominent memory which stood out was also the most disturbing.

Xylion could see as if through her eyes, as she travelled from the settlement to the canyon in which the runabout had been stranded. But this was not a memory of one of the visits he had been aware of. This one had taken place during the night. And she had not come to seek him out. Instead her only interest had been the runabout itself. And like an experienced engineer, she knew exactly what she was doing. She had

gone directly to the access panel which had housed the thruster module and removed it like an expert. Once complete, she could have easily returned to the settlement. Instead she stayed and lured an unsuspecting Ensign Srena outside. She surprised the other woman and just when the Andorian had let down her guard, Tela struck with unrelenting violence. She was too fast for her unprepared victim and unleashed blow after blow until Srena no longer moved.

Deeply disturbed by these images, Xylion penetrated deeper still and past the outer layers of her mind which contained her recent memories. What he found was a flood of thoughts. And not those of a twenty-three year old Vulcan woman but an endless amount of information belonging to a being many times older. It was far too much for him to handle without having prepared for this.

His eyes shot open to see her dark eyes staring back at him.

You should not have done that.

The voice blasted through his mind with such ferocity he flinched noticeably.

Then he felt something else. It reached out for him and he realized too late that this was not in his mind. No, this was something very much physical and it struck him in the chest with such force he went flying backward through the room, crashing into a couple of chairs which splintered under the impact.

Slightly dazed, he still managed to get back onto his feet. Tela remained sitting by the bed, her eyes closed again and she looked for all the world like nothing more than a young Vulcan woman, sleeping peacefully.

Xylion now understood that this was not the case at all. She was not Vulcan and neither were any of the settlers on this world. They had not crashed on this planet two decades earlier and they were not interested in growing their colony. They were interested only in him and what a merger between them could mean for these beings. He wasn't entirely certain what that would be, only that he could not allow it.

He found a phaser and an emergency subspace beacon, both of which he had brought from the runabout before it had left, and quickly departed his hut.

- VIII -

“Is it too late to change my mind about this?”

Culsten was sitting in the seat to the left of the centrally positioned captain’s chair on the bridge. Katanga had just finished placing a number of medical devices on his forehead and neck in order to monitor his vitals as well as being able to lower and raise serotonin levels within his body remotely.

Nora Laas was applying restraints to his wrists to tie them down tightly to the armrests and to ensure that he was unable to move. She stopped and looked up at the partially restrained helmsman. “I thought you volunteered for this.”

“That was before I knew that I was going to get tied down to a chair.”

“It’s a necessary precaution,” said Star who surrounded the helmsman along with the captain, Doctor Katanga and DeMara Deen. “The last few times these life forms made contact with us it resulted in near catastrophic damage to the ship.”

Katanga stepped closer. “Son, if you have any concerns about this, if you don’t feel comfortable offering up your body to an alien and quite possibly hostile incorporeal life form, tell us now. You do not have to do this.”

The first officer glared at the doctor, not appreciating his discouraging tone.

“You’re really selling me on this, Doc,” he said but then noticed Tazla Star’s hard look as well as the captain’s obvious concern. The ship rocked once more, reminding everybody on board that they were still in grave danger. He found his resolve then and nodded confidently. “No, I said I was going to do it and I will. This is why we joined Starfleet after all, isn’t it?”

The Trill gave him an encouraging nod.

“Sure, we’re out here to offer our bodies to whatever crazy life form would want to take over control,” Katanga mumbled.

Star rolled her eyes. “Just keep an eye on him, Eli. If there are any signs that he is in danger, get it to leave his body again.”

“That’s if it wants to leave,” he said before glancing at his tricorder.

“What does that mean?” Culsten said.

Star quickly moved on. “Now the next question: How do we make sure this life form takes the bait in the first place?”

“Great, now I’m bait. You guys really know how to make me feel confident about all this,” the helmsman said under his breath.

Deen offered a sympathetic smile before she turned towards Star and the captain. “We will have to lower the shields around the bridge for this to work.”

“What about the radiation from the nebula?” said Owens. “We’ll be exposed.”

Katanga gestured to Leeta, his nurse, who already had a hypospray at the ready and immediately began to administer it to the bridge crew. “This arithrazine compound should inoculate us for a short time. But I strongly suggest that we wrap up this meeting in under half an hour. Any longer and we will start to experience moderate to severe radiation sickness.”

“Alright,” said Owens. “Let’s clear the bridge of all but the most essential personnel and have them move to auxiliary control in case we take severe damage to the bridge while the shields are down.”

This was meant for Stanmore, Waldorf, Trinik and a couple of crewmen working at the aft consoles, all of which quickly secured their stations and then headed for the turbolift to get to a secondary control room. Leeta, the nurse, was also excused.

“Sir,” said Star, “you should head to auxiliary as well.”

But the captain shook his head. “We’re about to make first contact, hopefully, with a new life form. I’ll stay,” he added and in order to brook no further discussion on the topic he indicated towards tactical. “Commander, take that station and keep an eye on sensors and shields. If this doesn’t work we may need to raise them again in a hurry.”

The first officer looked as if she wanted to protest and stand her ground on the issue of the captain’s safety which after all was her responsibility. But when the ship took yet another hit, she reconsidered, realizing that they were losing valuable time and instead followed his order.

“Alright, people, let’s do this,” said Owens. “Commander, lower the shields around the bridge only.”

Star took a deep breath before entering the command, fully aware that this had been her suggestion but perhaps also suddenly realizing

how vulnerable it would make them. A quick glance at the current shield status showed that they didn't have much of choice either way. At the current rate of attack, *Eagle's* defensive systems would fail in a matter of minutes anyway. "Shields are down."

"Doctor?" Owens said.

"The lieutenant's serotonin levels are as low as I can safely bring them without causing any kind of neurological damage."

Almost instinctively everyone took a step backwards from Lif Culsten who began to look around nervously. "Does anyone have any idea what I can expect?"

"Most reports from people having been taken over by energy-based life forms have reported that they were aware of the possession while it took place but that they were unable to interact with the world around them. Almost as if they were looking through somebody else's eyes," said Deen, obviously making an attempt to instill confidence into the young helmsman.

"Sounds lovely."

"Of course that's just speculation. We have no idea what this encounter may feel like to you. All we know for certain is that you are unlikely to retain any memory of it," she added.

"Yeah, I remember the last time. Or rather, I don't."

The bridge became very quiet after that, as if everybody was holding their breath, waiting for either Lif Culsten's body being taken over by an alien life form, or the bridge exploding around them. Instead however, nothing happened.

"It's been five minutes," said the captain after checking the chronometer.

"Perhaps these beings are not interested in talking to us anymore," the doctor offered.

"No, something is happening," said Star

The others considered her with questioning glances.

"There hasn't been a single attack since we lowered the shields around the bridge," she said. "They've taken notice."

Owens nodded. "The question is; are they planning to make contact or something else?"

"I think we're about to find out," said Culsten as he looked straight ahead.

The others followed his gaze.

A single, spherical speck of light, the size of a watermelon and shimmering in alternating colors of crimson, azure and yellow had appeared just by the view screen as if it had passed right through solid matter and was now hovering in place.

The four officers around Culsten stepped back, forming a path from the screen towards the restrained helmsman. Nobody spoke.

The ball of light did not move.

"Maybe somebody should tell them that we're on a schedule," said Katanga.

The light shot forward and quickly approached the doctor, moving in so close it nearly blinded Katanga. To his credit, the doctor flinched once but then held his ground, trying to maintain eye contact even though the proximity of the bright light emanating from the entity did not make it easy for him.

Nora reached for her phaser.

Owens waved her off. "As you were, Lieutenant. Let's allow it to have a good look at us."

The light moved away from Katanga and moved to the captain next, illuminating his face as it had done to the doctor. Owens remained perfectly still as it hovered mere inches in front of him.

"Sir, I don't like this one bit," said the security chief, her hand still on her sidearm.

The light ball buzzed through the air again, this time to take a closer look at the Bajoran who clearly struggled, uncomfortable at having that thing right in her face.

"It's curious," said Deen. "It's to be expected."

"You'd think with all the time it spent taking over our crewmembers it would know us fairly well by now," the first officer said.

This in turn prompted the entity to move in front of the Trill.

"Perhaps this is the first chance this life form had to study us in greater detail. Remember, we had shields raised before so it stands to reason it may have required much more energy or effort when it came aboard on previous occasions," said Deen and was immediately rewarded with the entity's full attention. "This is truly amazing," she said as she studied the multi-colored light hovering in front of her. "I think it may be attracted to our voices," she added and then looked

towards the sitting helmsman who hadn't spoken since the entity had appeared. "Lif, say something. Get its attention."

Culsten's features turned quizzical. "What do I say?"

"I don't think it matters. Just keep talking to attract it. Hopefully it will sense your lowered serotonin levels and understand what to do."

"Right," he said and then focused on the hovering ball of energy. "Hey, you, ball of pretty lights. How about you come over here and have a look at me?"

Deen turned her head to shoot the helmsman an incredulous look as if to say: *Are you being serious?*

He simply shrugged.

But the entity did do just that.

"Yeah, hi there. My name is Lif Culsten and uh ... welcome on board *Eagle*. I know you've been here before but we were really kind of hoping we could talk to you this time. You know about this whole attacking us thing. See we're not here to hurt you or anything. We're really just explorers. Well, perhaps at the moment we are also soldiers fighting a war," he noticed the piercing look in the captain's eyes which clearly communicated his displeasure as to where he was going with this.

Culsten quickly changed tracks. "Not with you of course. Somebody else, somebody different. Never mind I said anything," he said quickly and shot the captain a quick, apologetic look. "Anyway, we'd love to know more about you and we know that you've been inside my head before so, if you don't mind perhaps you could just come back in. We've lowered my serotonin levels because we know that you prefer that. So, come on in, make yourself at home. Just, I'd appreciate it if you left everything the way you found it."

The entity continued to hover but otherwise nothing else was happening.

Out of ideas, Culsten glanced back to Deen who simply gestured for him to continue talking.

"We believe ... uh ... that there may have been some sort of misunderstanding between us and we'd just love to clear that up and –"

The globe began to change color more rapidly.

"I think something is happening. Something is definitely –"

The entity moved forward and right towards the Krellonian.

"Here it goes," he said just before it made contact and then seemingly effortlessly merged into his body, moving right through his chest.

Culsten looked back up, his eyes empty.

Katanga immediately had his tricorder out.

"Lif, are you still there?" Deen asked, taking a careful step forward.

He looked at her but did not speak.

Owens turned to the physician. "Doctor?"

Katanga studied the readouts of his tricorder. "I'm detecting an extremely faint brain pattern wave which is definitely not Culsten's," he said and looked at the helmsman. "In my professional opinion, the entity is now in control of the lieutenant's body."

Every set of eyes on the bridge focused on the sitting and now apparently possessed Krellonian.

The man in the chair considered the many faces around him curiously. When he tried to move he looked down at his wrists to notice the restraints, pulling at them slightly.

This caused Nora to place a hand on her phaser once more. Katanga noticed. "Remember, Lieutenant, you are more likely to harm Culsten than you are the life form if you use that thing."

Message apparently received, the Bajoran let go of the weapon, but she didn't relax her tense muscles, clearly remaining ready to jump into action if the occasion called for it. She grew impossibly more tense when she saw the captain slowly approach Culsten and then go down on his haunches a couple of feet in front of him to be on eye level.

"I am Captain Michael Owens, representing the United Federation of Planets. I am hoping we can open a dialogue between our people. We believe you may have attempted to communicate with us before. At the time we did not know of your existence or that you had attempted to make contact with us."

Culsten's eyes appraised Owens not unlike a child seeing another person for the first time. He did however not speak.

"We now believe that we may have intruded into your space, this nebula, possibly against your wishes and that this may have prompted the hostile actions against us. I wish to personally assure you that this was not our intention and that if you so wish, we will leave this place at once."

When this still promoted no reaction, Owens looked up, first at Star and then at Deen and Katanga. But nobody seemed to have an answer as how to proceed.

The captain glanced back Culsten. "Of course we'd much rather become friends. We are explorers and meeting new life forms is our primary mission. I'm certain we could learn much from you and perhaps you can learn from us as well."

Culsten tested his bonds again but was clearly unable to free himself. The captain turned to his security chief. "Lieutenant, remove the restraints, please."

"Captain, I really don't think that's a good idea," she said.

"I don't think it's a significant risk," offered Star from the tactical station right behind the sitting Culsten. "It does not appear it has access to any more strength beyond of what the lieutenant could naturally muster. If we had to, we could probably subdue it easily."

Nora nodded, probably surprising the others by not offering any additional objections or even attempting to argue with the one officer she had not seen eye-to-eye with since she had come aboard. She carefully moved to Culsten's seat to undo the restraints. She stepped back once she was done but stayed noticeably closer to the possessed man now.

Culsten slowly rose from his chair and Owens quickly followed suit. He took a few exploratory steps around the bridge and the others were giving him plenty of space.

"We really believe it could be greatly beneficial for both of our people if we were to open a dialogue," said Owens, trying again. Culsten turned to face him when he spoke but other than considering him with his wide-open eyes, he offered no response.

"Is it possible that he cannot understand us?" Owens said but kept looking at Culsten.

"I find that unlikely," said Star. "They have already demonstrated that they were able to operate our technology when inhabiting a humanoid body. That would indicate that they understand our language at the very least."

"Perhaps they just cannot talk like we can," said Katanga and then elaborated when Owens shot him a quizzical look. "Most humanoid speech centers are very elaborate systems. It takes time to learn how to

use them properly. Most newly born are able to use their motor functions much sooner than they are able to utilize speech."

Deen, clearly having had an idea, quickly found a data padd, typed something into it and then carefully held it out for Culsten's body.

It considered the device for a moment.

"Take it," she said. "Perhaps we can communicate this way."

He took the padd gingerly and studied it. Then it began to enter a few commands and revealed the display. *The Light*.

Everyone on the bridge grinned. Communication had been established.

"The light," Owens said. "Is that what you call yourself? The name of your people perhaps?"

He typed again: *The Light we are*.

Owens nodded. "Alright. We'll call you the Light," he said. "We hail from different species all working together towards a common goal. I am human," he said and then pointed at Star. She is a Trill," he continued and then pointed at the others. "Tenarian, Bajoran, another human, and he is a Krellonian."

He used the padd again, showing them the display. *Corporeal*.

"Yes, we are corporeal life forms," he said.

"It understands," said Deen with a smile.

"We apologize if we have intruded into your territory. We were not aware that you lived here," the captain said.

Energy deep within. Hurt.

Owens glanced at Deen.

She considered that for a moment. "Something hurts them. Something we are doing," she said.

"The warp core," said Katanga. "The anti-matter radiation it emits may be harmful to certain energy based life forms. I should have thought of that sooner."

"Owens to Hopkins."

"Hopkins, here sir."

"Lieutenant, I need you to immediately shut down the warp engine. Run all systems on auxiliary if you have to," said the captain.

"Yes, sir. However we will be running out of power in short order. We are already far below recommend levels," the chief engineer responded promptly.

“How much time do we have?”

“Well, now that the attacks have stopped, I can keep us running with shields for about an hour or so. But without warp power that’s the best I can do.”

Owens nodded as he considered the entity within Culsten in front of him. “I think we’re making inroads here. Hopefully the attacks are over. Shut down the core and keep us running as long as you can. Owens out,” he said and then spoke to the entity again. “We are shutting down our warp core. Its radiation will no longer cause you any harm.”

The hurt passed.

“We did not realize that our engines would cause you damage. However without them we will not be able to stay in this nebula much longer. The radiation in here hurts us without our shields,” he said. “But perhaps you would allow us to return once we have repaired our vessel. We could continue our dialogue and learn more about each other.”

The Light learns.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Deen said with a large grin.

Nora took a step forward but this time she was clearly more relaxed than she had been before. “Sir, may I ask the entity a question?”

Owens glanced at his security chief. “We do have some time. Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

Nora seemed unsure of herself for a moment, either having second thoughts or perhaps not quite comfortable addressing an alien life form within the body of one of her fellow officers. “We believe ... you may have been responsible for some incidents aboard our ship,” she said carefully.

The energy deep within.

Nora nodded her understanding. “You tried to stop it somehow after you were unable to communicate with us. But on our first night in this nebula, one of our crewmembers was killed. Do you know how this happened?”

The Light learned. Corporeal fragile.

“Where you responsible for his death?” she said.

The Light within corporeal. But another. Interference. The Light did not understand. Aggression.

“It must have possessed somebody else that night in engineering,” said Star. “Gedar tried to stop that person and he was killed.”

Corporeal fragile. The Light learned.

"You didn't mean to kill him," Nora said and then looked towards Owens. "It was an accident."

The captain nodded in agreement.

"The crewmember you possessed," the Bajoran asked. "Who was he?"

Features like this. Different. Then it touched both of Culsten's cheeks.

"Kolrami," Nora and Star said in unison, recognizing that he was referring to the protrusions common to the Zakdorn.

"That makes sense," said the security chief, mostly to herself. "He would have been on duty with Gedar that night and most likely returned to engineering at some point. And afterwards he would have had no memory of what took place while he was possessed."

Deen took a small step forward. "I have a question," she said.

Owens gestured for her to continue.

She focused on Culsten. "We discovered a rogue planet in the nebula with a colony of stranded Vulcans."

"Vulcans?" Owens said, clearly hearing this for the first time.

She nodded. "I'll explain it later," she said before she looked back at the possessed Krellonian. "Do you know of them?"

There was some hesitation on the Light's part before it began to use the padd again. *The Dark.*

"That doesn't sound good," Katanga said.

"Why would you refer to a group of Vulcans as the Dark?" said Star, as confused as the others.

The Dark. Not corporeal. Not like you. Like the Light once. Now the Dark

This made Deen think. "So they are not Vulcan. They used to be like you but not anymore. What does that mean? Have they somehow evolved? Or rather, devolved?"

Banished.

That piqued Owens' interest. "Banished why?"

Destroyers. Corrupted. Malevolent.

"Like criminals?" said Owens but looked towards Deen instead.

"We need to get Xylion out of there," she said.

Tazla Star leaned forward and over the tactical station. "Lieutenant, why don't you tell us what happened on this planet."

“We came across significant gravimetric readings early on in our survey which led us to this rouge planet surrounded by intense electromagnetic interference. We were struck by it and forced to crash. On the surface we found a fully independent eco system along with a group of Vulcans who said that they had crashed there themselves over twenty years ago. Long story short, some of the Vulcans eventually attacked Srena and Xylion worked out some sort of deal in which they would help us with our repairs in turn for him agreeing to stay behind.”

“That does not sound like very typical Vulcan behavior,” Katanga said.

“We thought the same thing. Xylion believed that elements of their settlement were slipping back into a pre-Surak style society. He thought he could help them if he stayed behind.”

Owens glanced at the entity. “But they are not Vulcans, are they?”

The Dark.

Deen shook her head. “They were very eager for him to stay. In fact, from the moment we arrived they clearly wanted us to become part of their settlement,” she said. “If they are not Vulcans, what did they want with any of us?”

All eyes focused back on the Light.

It’s own focus now rapidly moved from one face to the next, perhaps as if considering that very same question. Then it stopped suddenly and worked the padd again. *The Dark. Banished. Merge with corporeal. Banishment. No More.*

“They’re trying to escape,” said Deen.

Culsten was typing again but suddenly with much more urgency, almost furiously. *The Dark. Must be banished. Destroyers. Corrupted. Malevolent. The Dark must stop. The Light become Destroyers.*

“What are you saying?” said Nora, trying to pick up on the ambivalent message. “That the Dark will somehow corrupt you if they escape. Turn you into destroyers?”

The Light become Destroyers. The Dark. Stop. The Dark. Must be banished.

“I think it’s saying that the Light, his people, will stop the Dark before they’ll allow it to escape,” said Star.

“Stop them how?” the captain asked.

“I think we’ve already seen exactly how the Light uses its power,” she said. “And it is likely more than enough to destroy a settlement of faux Vulcans.”

“With our real Vulcan right in the middle of things,” said Deen.

Owens turned towards the entity. “Before you do anything allow us to retrieve our crewmember from the planet. That will remove the one element which you believe poses a danger to you.”

Judging by Culsten’s now rapid eye movements, the entity was now more agitated than ever before. *Risk great. Opportunity now. The Dark. Destroy.*

“Give us a chance to resolve this peacefully – “

The padd slipped out of Culsten’s hand and before it had even landed on the carpet, the Light entity had left its host body and the Krellonian collapsed. Nora jumped forward just in time to catch him before he could crumple to the floor.

“I think we have our answer, Captain,” said Katanga as he watched the entity, now back in its non-corporeal form darting across the bridge until it slipped right through the bulkhead and disappeared.

Deen took a step towards the captain. “We need to get Xylion out of there before – “

But Owens had already jumped into action. “Commander, red alert. Raise shields around the bridge and get everyone back to their posts,” he said as he headed for his chair and took his seat.

The red alert klaxons and the flashing crimson lights prepared the ship for battle stations. Just a few moments later, the remaining bridge crew returned to the deck to take their stations.

Katanga was tending to Culsten who Nora had deposited back into the chair next to the captain’s and he appeared to slowly coming back around.

Deen took her usual post at ops. “Something is definitely happening out there,” she said.

Star handed tactical back to Trinik and headed down the ramp and towards the command area. “On screen.”

A very similar light phenomenon as the one which had caused such significant damage to *Eagle* just a little while earlier was beginning to form not too far off the starboard bow. Except that this one was much larger, already half the size of the ship itself, it was still growing by

incorporating various other specks of light which seemed to be attracted to the formation as if it were a massive magnet.

"They're not wasting any time," said Star.

Deen checked her readouts. "It's on the move. Heading directly towards the rogue planetoid. At their present rate of acceleration I estimate they will reach it within forty-six minutes."

Star turned towards the captain. "Permission to assemble a rescue team."

Owens nodded. "What do you suggest?"

"We can't risk *Eagle*, especially since we're running on backup power. But I could take a shuttle. With any luck we can overtake the entity, reach the planet, grab Xylion and then haul ass out of there before the attack commences."

Deen turned from her station. "Only problem is we don't have a vessel. *Nebuchadrezzar* is totaled and the main shuttlebay out of commission after that landing. The secondary shuttle bay has been reprioritized for the sensor array construction so that's out as well."

"Take the yacht," Culsten said, referring to the small ship docked to the underside of *Eagle's* saucer section and usually reserved for the captain or diplomatic functions. The support vessel was rarely used as the runabout was more efficient in most ways.

All eyes turned to the Krellonian still sitting to the captain's right.

"And you're going to need your best pilot. That's me."

"Son, do I have to remind you that you were just playing host to an energy-based life form which was in total control of your body? You're in no shape to return to duty," said the doctor who was still hovering over the young man.

"Funny thing about that, Doc," he said with an easy smile. "I don't remember a thing about any of that," he added and then turned to look at the captain next to him. "I'm ready to go, sir. And you'll need me."

But the captain referred to the medical professional instead.

Katanga uttered a heavy sigh. "Alright, fine," he said and gave the Krellonian a hypospray. "This really goes against my better judgment but this should keep you on your feet for a couple of hours. I want you back in sickbay the moment you come back."

"Cross my heart. Isn't that what they say?"

Owens looked towards operations. "Is the yacht ready to be deployed?"

"We've taken some damage to the bottom of the saucer section on deck sixteen. The yacht itself is undamaged but one of the docking clamps is frozen in place," she said and looked back up. "Hopkins and an engineering team should be able to have that fixed in a few minutes."

Owens nodded. "Bridge to engineering."

But this time there was no response.

"Owens to Hopkins."

Still nothing.

The captain turned to Trinik at tactical.

"There is no response from anybody in main engineering and —" a warning sound from his tactical board redirected his attention. "Sir, there is a security alert originating in main engineering."

"What?" Nora Laas barked.

"Clancy to Nora. We've got a situation in main engineering," said the Assistant Counselor over the comm. "It's Decaux."

Owens pointed at Nora. "Get down there and resolve this. And do it quickly, we're out of time."

Nora nodded and headed for the turbolift. "Security to main engineering."

Star looked towards Deen and then Culsten. "You two, head to deck sixteen and see what you can do in the meantime. Try and get the yacht ready for take-off," she said but then instead of following them she jogged to catch up with Nora Laas heading for main engineering.

- IX -

When Nora and Star arrived in main engineering, Clancy as well as an armed, four-man security team headed by José Carlos had already arrived.

It didn't take Nora long to find what had prompted the response.

Sierra Decaux stood just a few feet from the warp core, holding a flustered and clearly scared Sirna Kolrami in front of her with a matchbox-sized phaser digging deep into his neck.

Everyone in the room was focused on the developing hostage situation, including chief engineer Louise Hopkins who stood closest, desperately trying to appeal to the enraged crewman with the weapon.

Clancy turned to the two women as soon as they had arrived. "She showed up here a couple of minutes ago looking for Kolrami and then threatened him with a phaser. She's totally convinced that he is responsible for Gedar's death."

Nora and Star exchanged knowing looks.

"You killed him!" An obviously unhinged Decaux yelled as she forced the cone of that phaser even deeper into him. "You hated Jin. You always have. You were jealous, you knew he was a better engineer and you hated him for it. Tell them, tell everyone how you hated him."

"I ... please ... just don't—"

"Tell them!"

Clancy looked on with obvious concern. "This is not going to end well. Decaux is clearly unstable. She was when she came to see me in my quarters last night," he whispered. "It's her mental disorder. If it has gone untreated, she could be subject to all kinds of severe symptoms, including hallucinations."

Nora nodded but kept her eyes on Decaux by the warp core. "You mean like believing that alien life forms have taken over the crew and killed Gedar?"

He looked at her, obviously noticing the tone in her voice which seemed to imply that there was much more going on than he was aware of.

"It's not such a crazy theory anymore," said Nora.

But Star shook her head. "It doesn't matter what she believes. We do not have the time for this. We need to neutralize her quickly so that

we can get the rescue mission under way. Any further delay does not just risk Xylion's life but the life of the entire crew as well," she said and reached for her weapon.

"Agreed," Nora said. "But that type-I phaser she's got pinned to Kolrami's neck is deadly at point blank range. Besides, you don't want to risk hitting the warp core with a stray shot."

"You have a better idea?"

"Let me try to talk to her."

Even Clancy looked unconvinced. "You? No offense but I don't think she may be particularly responsive to you at the moment."

But the Bajoran glanced at Star instead.

The first officer gave her a nod. "Give it a try."

Clancy looked rather befuddled at the sudden trust between these two women who just a couple of days earlier had been pretty much at each other's throats.

In the meantime Hopkins was doing her best to try and defuse the situation, concerned of course for her own officer as well as all the security personnel with phasers pointed into the one direction which could easily invite a catastrophe. "Please, we can talk about this? Just let him go and lower your weapon."

But Decaux's eyes just grew wider when she saw the chief engineer. "You, you had something to do with this, as well," she said. "Why couldn't you just stay away from him? You knew he was with me. You knew he was mine."

Hopkins swallowed, apparently not sure how to reply to this and fully aware that Decaux was at least halfway right. She had been involved with Gedar and it had been a tragic mistake.

Before she could think of any kind of response which could somehow release the quickly building tension in the room, she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. She turned to see Nora Laas having stepped up behind her.

Hopkins nodded thankfully when she gave her a look to let her know that she was going to deal with Decaux. Hopkins stepped back while Nora took a careful step closer to the hostage taker.

"You've come to finish what you started, Lieutenant?" Sierra Decaux barked. "You've come to finally kill me."

The security chief raised her arms, showing her empty palms. "I'm not armed."

Decaux laughed at that. "We all know you don't need weapons to kill."

"You're probably right but I have no intentions of harming you, Sierra. I just want to ensure that you won't either."

"You've given me no choice. You think I killed Gedar. You all do," she said, raising her voice. "But it was him. I saw it with my own two eyes. He killed Gedar and he needs to pay for it," she said and moved the phaser to the side of his head, pressing it against him with such force, it was beginning to draw blood.

"I didn't ... I really didn't. Please ... stop this."

"Shut up," she barked. "I know what I saw. You attacked him and threw him down the pit," she said and when she turned slightly to look behind her where the alleged crime had taken place, one of the security guards shifted position to get a better shot. But Decaux noticed when she turned back. "Get back!" she shouted. And then to Nora. "Tell them to stay back or I will kill him. I'll make him pay for what he did, I swear."

The Bajoran nodded and turned around to address her people. "You heard her, get back and do not open fire. That's an order," she said and then faced Decaux again. "Satisfied? None of my men will fire. You have nothing to fear from us, alright?"

"No," she said, vehemently shaking her head. "Nothing is alright. Nothing. You think I killed him."

"Not anymore, I don't," she said. "You were right all along. Right about what you saw, you were even right about what you told Clancy when you went to see him. Your theory about alien life forms on the ship. You were right about that, too. They are here. In the nebula. And they were responsible for what happened to Gedar. Not you, not Kolrami."

The agitated woman considered Nora carefully and for a moment the security chief thought she had gotten through to her.

"No," she said and took a step back, closer to the warp core, pushing Kolrami with her. "You're telling me what I want to hear. That's all. I'm not stupid. I know I'm suffering from a condition. I know that it messes with my mind sometimes. There are no life forms. It was Kolrami, I saw him do it."

Nora suddenly wondered what the hell she was doing, standing there just a few feet from a crazed woman ready to kill her hostage

because she was convinced he had killed the man she had loved. She wasn't a detective and she sure as hell wasn't a negotiator. This was Clancy's area of expertise. She was a warrior. A fighter. Given the chance she'd be able to easily disarm and neutralize this mostly untrained woman. That was what she was good at, not talking somebody down. Problem was, the chance simply wasn't there. Decaux would be able to depress that trigger long before she could even make it halfway towards her.

"I believe you. I really do. In fact I know you are right. I know Lieutenant Kolrami threw Gedar over that railing and to his death," she said, running out of ideas and hoping to be able to distract her to get closer.

"What?" Kolrami said. "You're as insane as she is. I didn't—"

"Shut up," Nora and Decaux said in unison.

"You're ... you're just saying what I want to hear."

Nora shook her head and took a very small, very careful step closer. "Not at all. Let's go through the events of that night together shall we?" she said and then continued before she could object. "You were angry at Gedar for being unfaithful to you. You wanted to teach him a lesson and confront and embarrass him in public. And you found that Kolrami and Yunta were more than willing to go along with this and help out, both of them holding their own grudges. You three made a plan to come here and confront him. Alone initially and then with an audience. Correct?"

She nodded along slowly.

"Kolrami was to make sure he was alone in engineering at first. Then you were going to confront him and after that Yunta would walk in as well. And then when he was on the defensive Kolrami was going to bring in a crowd. Maybe even Hopkins as well, to reveal him as the fraud he was."

Tears were beginning to stream into her eyes. "He was a fraud. But he didn't deserve to die."

"Of course not."

"When I came in, Kolrami was there. He shouldn't have been but he was there and he was fighting with Gedar," she said, as she recalled the events of that night.

The engineer in the death grip was beginning to shake his head. "No, I wasn't ... I wasn't there."

"Yes, you were," Nora said sharply. "But you don't remember, do you? In fact you don't remember what happened at all that night. You have inexplicably lost all memory of what took place."

"I ..." but Kolrami got stuck on his own words.

"You threw him over," said Decaux. "I saw you do it."

"No," he said but sounded a lot less convinced of this than just a moment ago.

"But can you be certain, Lieutenant?" Nora said. "Can you be absolutely certain, without a hint of doubt, that you didn't do it?"

"I ... I didn't do it. I would never kill a fellow crewman," he said, sounding less and less assured of himself.

Nora focused back on the hostage taker. "There have been a number of odd incidents aboard this ship lately. A lot of unexplained things have happened which didn't appear to make any sense initially. People acting strangely and out of character. Now we know why. The nebula is home to a non-corporeal life form and our presence here has damaged them. They've tried to communicate with us but when it didn't work they become more desperate. Taking over certain crewmembers and making them do things. Like they took over Kolrami here. Gedar tried to interfere and was killed. The life form didn't mean to do it. It was an accident."

The engineer's eyes opened wider.

"That's ... that's not possible," mumbled Decaux.

At that Nora smirked. "You haven't been out in space very long, have you? We've seen much crazier things than that. Trust me."

Decaux made eye contact with the Bajoran security officer who had managed to take another step towards her now, seemingly trying to judge if the security chief could be telling her the truth.

"Point is; you didn't kill Gedar. Kolrami didn't kill him. Nobody on this ship did."

Nora noticed that the pressure on the phaser digging into the engineer's skull lessened. Kolrami noticed this too and still fearing for his life, took action.

"No, wait," Nora shouted but it was already too late.

Kolrami drove his elbow hard into Decaux's midsection. The woman lost her grip on the phaser and on the engineer who didn't hesitate to push himself off Decaux and jump away from her.

Decaux doubled over in pain but was also pushed backwards and towards the warp core with enough momentum to easily go over the protective railing around the pit.

Nora reacted instantly. But she had no clear path to Decaux as Kolrami was coming flying her way in a desperate attempt to escape. The security chief spun around him to avoid Kolrami, for now not so much concerned about him but rather about Decaux's uncontrolled tumble towards the warp core pit.

Once she had completed the spin and the engineer was behind her, Decaux was still out of reach. Nora watched in horror as the woman hit the red safety railing backwards with such force, she flipped right over it, falling head over heels into the space between the deck and warp core chamber to plummet to her death in pretty much the exact same manner as Jinlu Gedar had days earlier.

Decaux's eyes were wide open in shock and with the terrible realization that she would die just like the man she had loved, perhaps even considering the tragic irony of getting killed in the exact same fashion at the hands of the very much the same man.

Nora Laas jumped forward in a last ditch effort to try and prevent exactly that from taking place. She flew through the air, towards Decaux and the warp core pit, determined not to allow another such incident on her ship but also unable to convince herself that she wasn't already too late.

She hit the deck painfully, landing on her chest and her own momentum allowed her to slip across the smooth flooring. But by that time Decaux had already fallen out of her line of sight, disappearing into the pit.

She arrived at the edge of the deck less than a split-second later immediately reaching down, hoping against hope to be able to grab something but already aware that it would likely be nothing but air.

Her right hand made contact with fabric and without even thinking about it she brought in her other hand to take hold of whatever she had snatched.

A sudden, powerful pull, made her grunt, as she nearly dislocated her shoulders. She somehow managed to keep her balance and avoid going over and into the pit herself and only once she was reasonably sure she was wasn't going to go head first to her own death, she

allowed herself to look down and see Sierra Decaux dangling in the air where she was holding on to her arm.

“Gotcha.”

Xylion had left his hut armed with a phaser and a sling-over bag in a hurry.

What he had gleaned from the short mind meld was far worse than he had already suspected. The clues of course had all been there earlier on. The settlers odd behavior, ranging from hunting and consuming animal meat, their unwillingness to assist with repairs to the runabout, the lack of children in the settlement, their unprovoked attack on Ensign Srena, and Tela and her father's insistence on not just an immediate marriage but one seemingly focused on their copulation.

Xylion understood that he wasn't entirely blameless. After all Deen had clearly suspected something much sooner and he was willing to entertain the notion that he had disregarded earlier clues partially because of his desire to study this intriguing Vulcan settlements so isolated from the rest of their kind. Perhaps he had even felt a certain attraction to Tela and an urge to assist her and her people rediscover their Vulcan roots. And in retrospect he understood that these elements had made him agree to their proposal to stay behind far too easily.

Their goal seemed to be clear to him now. The motives were not.

When the away team had declined their offer to stay and become part of the settlement, Tela had attacked Srena. She had purposefully not killed the ensign but caused enough damage to force their hand, allow for her scheme of blackmail which would see Xylion remain on this world while the rest of the team returned to *Eagle* by conveniently providing a necessary module to repair the runabout.

Tela and her people had wanted Xylion from the start. Why precisely he didn't know but considering that there were no Vulcans on this world but him, he had his suspicions.

And he knew that whatever their agenda, he could not allow it.

It was already dark outside when he had left the hut and he hoped to be able to use this to his advantage in order to slip out of the settlement undetected.

These creatures, whatever they were, were immensely powerful, that much he had learned from his brief mind meld. He knew his chances were slim and yet he had to try to escape, attempt to send a distress signal and stay in hiding for as long as it took to avoid them.

His plan for now was to head back towards the canyon where the runabout had crashed, climb to the very top and attempt to send a signal with the emergency beacon he had placed into his bag. Then he would continue north, find another peak and try again, always staying on the move.

He had no illusions that the creatures would begin an extensive search as soon as they realized he was gone which was likely as quickly as Tela fully regained consciousness.

It took at least an hour to reach the canyon from the settlement but Xylion knew something was very wrong after just half that time.

Thanks to his eidetic memory he knew exactly what the path was supposed to look like and it was nothing like he remembered. Instead the terrain was rocky and steep as if he was already climbing a mountain instead of traversing the steppe-like desert he had come to expect.

The environment had changed.

He stopped, trying to get his bearings again but nothing appeared to be where he expected it to be. He turned to head east instead. It wasn't the direction he had wanted to go but it would still take him away from the settlement.

After less than a five hundred yards he realized he was once again heading up a mountain just like he had before. And he knew which one. The very same Tela had taken him to the day he had first arrived.

The creatures were not only leading him where they wanted him to go, they had the power to alter his surroundings. He understood then that this world was nothing but an illusion created for the specific purpose of making him feel at home. The hot climate and dry air were after all close approximations of what Vulcan felt like.

He saw no other choice for now but do continue to climb the mountain. There was no other place to go.

It didn't take him long to reach the plateau overlooking the settlement below as well as much of the surrounding desert which he was now convinced wasn't what it appeared. Nothing here was.

Very much aware that he didn't have much time, he took a knee and then removed the emergency beacon from the bag he had brought. Xylion understood that the chances for a rescue were minimal but he needed to attempt it for no other reason than to warn *Eagle* of the situation on the ground.

“Xylion.”

He stood upon hearing his name. Vulcan hearing was sensitive enough that he was sure he would have heard anyone approach. But when he stood and turned he found that the entire settlement, seemingly every last man and woman, stood on the plateau with him, Tela at the front just a few meters away. They had not simply climbed up here. They had appeared.

“Xylion, what are you doing?” she asked.

“I am attempting to contact my ship to advise them of the situation I have encountered here.”

She looked at him curiously. “Situation?”

He studied her face and then those of the others behind her, including her father’s. They almost looked concerned. “There is no need to maintain your deception. I have already learned that you are not Vulcan.”

Tela took a small step forward and Xylion realized that his back was fairly close to the precipice. If indeed it was real. “We took a form we thought you’d be most comfortable with.”

“And what was the purpose of your deception?”

“To make you feel welcome, of course,” she said. “We only ever wanted you to be comfortable.”

Xylion took a small step backwards but room was running out. “Your intentions were quite clearly to procreate. With me.”

She nodded slightly. “Is this not how humanoid cultures consume their feelings?”

“I doubt very much that that is your motive.”

“Than consider it an experiment,” she said. “That was your initial interest in us, was it not? To study us. You are a scientist after all.”

“I believe you fundamentally misunderstand the scientific method,” he said with a raised eyebrow.

The concern and sympathy dropped off Tela’s face as her eyes grew brighter. “We need you Xylion. We need you to survive.”

“If that is truly the case I am willing to discuss whatever problems you are experiencing. But first you must explain your true nature. You are not humanoid?”

She shook her head. “We are bound to this planet by a powerful force. You possess what we require to escape. You’re genetic material holds the answer.”

“What is the nature of the force that binds you here?”

“That is not relevant.”

Xylion was just a few feet from the precipice now and Tela was still approaching. “All information is relevant if you require my assistance.”

“The only assistance we require is your compliance. If you are not willing to provide it willingly, we can extract your genome sequence by force. It is a painful process you will not survive.”

Xylion looked her right in the eye. “Considering your threat it would be logical for me to assume that you have ill-intentions and that you might pose a danger once you overcome your current limitations.”

“We just want to be free,” she shot back with clear anger in her voice. “We have been imprisoned here for far too long.”

“Imprisoned implies that you are considered criminal or potentially dangerous.”

“Xylion,” she said, sounding softer now, and nearly within arm’s length. “There is no place for you to go. This will happen. Give us what we want freely and you will not be harmed. There is no other option.”

He looked passed her and into the sky. Then he considered her once more. “There is always another option,” he said and took another step back and over the precipice.

“No!” Tela screamed and then dove after him.

* * *

Once the hostage crisis in engineering had been resolved, it had been only a matter of minutes for Hopkins and a small team of her people to rectify the damage to the docking clamps which kept the captain’s yacht securely pinned to the underside of the saucer section. Deen and Culsten had already primed the vessel for immediate liftoff and as soon as all the clamps had been cleared, the small, oval shaped vessel, christened *Golden Eagle*, disengaged from its mother ship and headed for a course towards the rouge planet.

“I’ve been wanting to take her out for a spin ever since she was refitted with a warp core,” said Lif Culsten while he sat at the helm.

"Not likely you're going to get the chance to use it," said Deen by his side. "We can't use warp drive inside the nebula."

He smirked at that. "No, not theoretically speaking. In practice we actually have no idea what would happen if we did."

"Let's hope we don't have to find out," said Star, sitting at a console behind them. "How long until we reach the planet?"

"We're pushing full impulse," he said and then just to stress his point, the ship was hit by strong spatial turbulence, rattling the occupants. "Not a recommended speed in this soup but I think she can take it. If we can keep it up we should get there within fifteen minutes."

A computer station behind them exploded with a shower of sparks. Star was on her feet in an instant with a fire extinguisher to deal with the damage.

"Overload to the starboard EPS manifold," said Deen while her fingers danced over her panel. "I've rerouted power to the port manifold. Let's hope it holds."

"Seeing how rarely we've used her there shouldn't be any wear and tear," said Culsten. "Probably just couldn't take the sudden acceleration."

"Let's keep an eye on power levels," said Star once she had dealt with the flames. "I do not want to be stranded out here."

"Right there with you, Commander," said Deen. "I know only so many songs to use for distress signals."

"Is it just me," said the Krellonian and leaned forward and closer to the viewport, "or does the nebula look different?"

"No, you're right," said Deen. "I can hardly see any of those little particles which used to swirl all around this place any more."

"The Light," said Star, referring to them by the name the lifeform had given them.

"I think I know why," said Culsten. "Look at that."

The two women turned to see what he was pointing at. Not too far ahead a massive, pulsing entity had appeared. Similar in composition to what they had witnessed earlier when *Eagle* had come under attack, except that this phenomenon was at least five times larger. It now rivaled in size a small moon and it was heading into the same direction as *Golden Eagle*.

Deen shook her head as she looked down at her sensor data. "It's pure, concentrated energy made up of thousands of individual

signatures. The Light has transformed itself into a single and massively powerful entity."

"If they can bring to bear as much relative power as they used against *Eagle*," Star said but then looked towards Deen.

"It's probably more than enough to wipe out a planet."

The first officer turned to look at the pilot. "Give me every last drop of speed you can out of those engines, Mister. We need to overtake that thing and get to this planet before it can."

He nodded sharply. "Better hold on to your seats. This is going to get rough."

It wasn't an understatement. In order to muster the power required to win this race, Culsten had to divert energy from other systems including the inertial dampers which were designed to keep the ship from tearing itself apart in the hostile environment. All three officers were forcefully pushed back into their seats as the yacht accelerated way beyond any recommended velocities.

"ETA eight minutes, twelve seconds," said Culsten.

"What can we expect to find once we get there?" Star asked Deen, the only person in the away team who had actually been to that world.

"A small and relatively primitive colony of Vulcans on the southern continent within a dry desert environment. But considering what we know now, that they are somehow related to these Light life forms made up of pure energy, it's not unreasonable to think that they may be able to alter their appearance and perhaps even their environment."

"All we need is to locate Xylion and get him out of there," said Star.

"The planet is surrounded by massive energy discharges which caused us to crash in the first instance. We wouldn't want a repeat of that," the Tenarian said.

"How do we get around those?"

"I might be able to depolarize the hull and reinforce our systems to withstand an electromagnetic strike," said Deen and was already at work. "That way we may be able to slip by it."

The yacht passed the Light formation quickly thereafter and with little incident. But Star and the others could see that while it moved at a somewhat slower pace than their ship, there were still smaller particles joining the whole even as it continued towards the planet. It was still

growing. The Light it appeared was not willing to take any chances. Whatever they feared about the Dark, whatever history existed between them, it had decided to bring to bear all the force it could muster to stop it from leaving the rogue planet.

“Visual range,” said Culsten.

Before them Aphrodite cleared up like a veil which had been pulled to reveal the lonely, gray planet divorced from its star a long time ago. As Deen had warned, powerful lighting bolts were completely encircling that world as if to warn anyone to stay away. Of course this was not an option for the away team.

“I wonder if this is some sort of security mechanism,” said Deen as she watched those energy discharges whip around the planet. “Perhaps that is what keeps the Dark on that planet.”

“It’s possible,” said Star. “Or it could be designed to keep us off it. Lieutenant, make sure you keep your distance to those things, I do not want to put our modifications to the test unless we absolutely have to.”

“You got it, sir,” said the helmsman. “I’ll keep us well clear,” he added and then focused on his control to dive and bank the small vessel away from the discharges while still heading towards the planet.

One of the lightning bolts shot by *Golden Eagle* so closely, both Deen and Star ducked reflexively.

“Well clear?” Deen said and shot him displeased look.

“Clear enough at any rate,” he said without taking his eyes off the controls. “This bucket isn’t exactly built to dodge lightning.”

“Just get us down there in one piece,” Star said as she held on tightly to her station while Culsten had the vessel perform sharp maneuvers into every which direction to keep them in one piece.

“Almost there,” he said after he had put the ship upside down with the planet now suddenly hovering far above their heads.

“Are you quite sure you’re going the right way?” Deen said.

“Hope you haven’t had dinner yet,” he said with a little smirk and then put the ship into such a hard dive, it felt as if the skin was being pulled off their teeth.

The move paid off, none of the discharges connected with the yacht and they found themselves in the atmosphere making a rapid descend.

“That was fun,” said Culsten and looked at a blanched Deen at this side.

"Let's just ... not do that again," she said, clearly trying to compose herself. "Ever."

Now that the harrowing maneuvers were behind them, Star felt safe enough to step up behind Culsten and Deen. "Lieutenant," she said to the Tenarian. "Can you get us to that that colony?"

"It should be coming up right below us. About 500 kilometers."

"Push her hard," she told Culsten, "if we figured out about these life forms I can't believe Xylion is far behind."

Deen spotted the peak first and pointed towards it. "Over there."

Culsten banked the ship to the right to head towards the large mountain range Deen had indentified.

"Life signs?" Star asked.

Deen nodded. "Vulcans. A lot of Vulcans."

"But which one is the real one?"

They were still too far away to make out anything taking place on the ground so Deen studied her sensor readouts instead. "I think they are all assembled together," she said.

Star shook her head. "No, not assembled. They've got somebody surrounded."

"It has to be Xylion."

"Uh, somebody just went over that cliff," Culsten said when they were coming into visual range.

"Lock on to that life sign and beam it up," Star said.

Deen's fingers were racing over her controls, frustration etched into her features. "I can't get a lock while it is in free fall."

"Ten meter radius from the life sign, beam up everything you can get a hold of," she said and then turned towards the back of the flight deck which had its own dedicated transporter pad.

"Got it. Energizing."

What Star saw slowly materializing was not apparently humanoid and her heart sank. That was until she realized that the reason the shape seemed so odd was that it wasn't one person they had beamed on board. Xylion materialized along with what appeared to be a young Vulcan woman clinging on to him.

She took a step towards them. "Commander?"

The Vulcan science officer freed himself from the woman who seemed momentarily startled to find herself on the yacht. Xylion

showed no such hesitation, immediately aware where he was, he strode directly to the nearest weapons locker.

Tela jumped back onto her feet even before he had reached it.

Star turned towards Deen. "Beam her back to—" she didn't get a chance to finish that sentence when Tela jumped forward and drove her hard into the bulkhead.

Xylion fired the phaser he had retrieved but the creature masquerading itself as a Vulcan woman shrug off the stun setting with no apparent difficulty at all.

Apparently realizing the more immediate danger of being whisked away again, it turned towards the front of the yacht and darted directly for Deen to stop her from using the transporter.

Culsten, leaving the ship on autopilot, jumped out of his seat to intercept her. It was a fruitless effort as Tela, using surprising strength, simply shoved the Krellonian out of the way. Then holding on to Deen by her shoulders, she easily dragged her out of the chair and sent her flying towards the back of the flight deck.

Xylion in the meantime had readjusted his phaser to a higher setting and took careful aim. Tela spotted him just in time and then, not unlike a ghost, became ethereal, causing the beam to phase right through her and burn into the bulkhead instead. She then practically glided across the deck in an instant, taking on a solid shape again only once she was directly in front of Xylion and then reached out with both her hands to squeeze his throat.

He fought back and they tumbled to the floor, the Tela creature kneeling on top of him, bringing her face close to his. "This could have been a pleasurable experience for you Xylion, if you had only chosen to do as I had asked of you. Now I will consume your essence and nothing of you will remain but an empty and dead husk," she said and moved closer to his head even while she continued to restrict his airflow. "My people will be free," she said before her mouth opened far wider than should have been possible for her anatomy and until most of her face was nothing more than a dark, gaping hole, seemingly intend on swallowing up his entire head whole.

Deen watched in horror from where she had landed against the back bulkhead as the young Vulcan woman had transformed into a vampire-like creature attempting to suck the life right out of Xylion. She couldn't stand and the pain in her leg felt as if bones had broken. Out of

the forward viewport she could see that the yacht was heading back towards orbit but with nobody at the controls, the ship was traveling at an almost leisurely pace.

She spotted Star coming back around. She had landed closer to the controls than anyone else. "Commander," she cried out. "Take us up."

The Trill spotted Xylion and the creature sitting on top of him and then Deen pointing at the forward viewports. There the nebula was slowly becoming visible passed the gray cloud cover surrounding the planet.

Star understood and jumped to the controls, pitching the yacht sharply upwards and engaging the impulse engine for additional speed. She hung on for dear life while everyone else tumbled towards the back including Xylion and Tela.

The yacht shot clear of the clouds and back into orbit.

The creature saw that they were about to leave the planet behind and abandoned Xylion for the moment to head towards Star. "No, we are not ready yet."

"Too bad," said Star. "Because, ready or not, we're out of here."

But the creature had other intentions. It turned ethereal once more and suddenly gravity no longer seemed to be a hindrance as it easily glided towards the front.

Star, looking over her shoulder, saw her approach. When she looked forward again she realized that they were headed straight for the lightning storm. "Lieutenant, I really hope those modifications you've made to the hull will work."

Deen understood what she was saying. "Only one way to find out."

The creature reached out for the Trill but Star dodged underneath her and rolled away just in time.

The Dark looked up and out of the viewport to see a massive energy discharge heading straight for the ship. "No!"

The discharge hit and seemed to penetrate the outer hull like it was made out of tissue paper. The yacht trembled but otherwise remained in tact while the energy bolt ripped right into the Dark causing it to scream and screech as it seemed to experience unbearable pain. It turned ethereal again but only for a moment. Then it seemed to spontaneously erupt into flames and burn from the inside out. Seconds later it had vanished, leaving behind only dust.

Star got back onto her feet and shot Deen a look. "I think you're theory about those discharges may have been correct," she said and helped Culsten back onto his feet who appeared a little dazed but otherwise unharmed. "Lieutenant, take the helm, let's not take any more chances and avoid us getting hit again. Then get us out of here as fast as you can."

He nodded and made his way back to the helm controls.

"Commander, are you alright?" Star asked Xylion as he was slowly sitting up against the bulkhead, holding on to his neck.

"I have sustained bruising and lacerations to my esophagus. However, my injuries are minor," he said, his voice clearly strained from the attack.

"Good," she said and pulled him back to his feet. "We may still need you to get us out of this nebula. Your new friends down on that planet have enemies up here and last we checked they were very much set on their destruction. I'd rather not be around when that happens."

"The threat has passed," said Deen who had managed to pull herself into a chair. "Whatever they tried to do with Xylion, they've failed and they remain bound to that world they've been banished to."

"Yeah, I don't think the Light got the memo," said Culsten.

All eyes turned towards the forward viewport where the Krellonian was staring at a massive entity of light approaching the planet. It was now easily the size of a natural moon and brimming with barely contained fury, ready to be unleashed onto a target with devastating effect. The lightning all around the planet ceased all at once as the Light entity moved into orbit. Not a moment later an energy beam the width of a starship shot out from the phenomenon and struck the planet dead on.

Xylion had taken the seat next to Culsten while Star returned to her own chair. The Vulcan was first in getting an update. "I am reading energy signatures beyond our capability to measure. At this rate the planet will lose molecular cohesion in approximately thirty-four seconds."

"Losing molecular cohesion doesn't sound too bad," said Star.

Xylion clarified. "The resulting shockwave will destroy this vessel."

"Always with the bad news," she said and looked at Culsten. "Can we outrun it on impulse?"

He shook his head. "No chance."

"Alright, you wanted to test her new warp drive. Let's do it now."

But Xylion shot Star a concerned look. "Commander, using warp drive within the nebula may cause unexpected complications which we may not survive."

"Sorry, I must have missed the part where you were offering an alternative."

Xylion said nothing.

The planet was now glowing and began to pulsate, absorbing immense amounts of energy no spatial body was able to handle.

Star looked at the pilot. "Do it, do it now."

He nodded sharply. "Here goes nothing."

The yacht deployed two short warp nacelles which lit up briefly when the warp core came online. But the ship didn't go anywhere.

"What just happened?" Star asked.

Culsten shook his head in frustration as he tried to make sense of the readings his panel were offering him. "I don't understand, the warp core did power up and according to this we should be traveling at warp two."

Xylion raised an eyebrow. "As I attempted to explain before, the composition of this nebula make any attempt of creating a stable warp bubble extremely unpredictable and unlikely."

"The planet is breaking up," said Deen from an aft station.

"Wormhole, dead ahead," said Xylion.

A swirling black mass had appeared right in front of the yacht, looking to suck anything and everything into uncertainty.

"And we're going in," Culsten added.

Star held on to her station as tightly as she could, fully cognizant that it was likely not going to be nearly enough to survive that encounter. "Brace for impact."

Day Eleven: Exit Music

- I -

There was a battle taking place inside the nebula and Michael Owens couldn't help and feel as if he was fighting his own. With the events of the last twenty-four hours he hadn't gotten much rest and hardly any sleep at all. And of course it didn't help that he had lost a whole night to what now seemed to have been a failed attempt by the entities known as the Light trying to contact him. The following night was cut short by the discovery of Gedar's dead body, not a willful murder as they had initially assumed but instead an accident caused by a crewmember possessed by the Light and attempting to shut down *Eagle's* warp core which was causing them such harm.

Michael couldn't help wonder how the young man's life could have been saved and how a great deal of damage caused over the last week could have been avoided if he had only been able to establish some way to communicate with those beings.

He quickly understood the futility of that line of reasoning and gave up on it. There were much more pressing issues to worry about now than what could have been or morn the sleep he had lost over the last few days.

The entire ship and crew were on the line now and that was more than enough to shake off the growing fatigue which had led him to be a captain in absentia for most of crises gripping his ship since they had arrived in the nebula. He was determined to give the latest and greatest danger to his ship and crew his full and undivided attention.

On the view screen the nebula which had been such a source of marvel and inspiration to many since they had arrived appeared to be on fire. Bright, strobing lights in the distance gave proof to a battle between life forms of pure energy. Their history and transgressions against each other unknown to them, all they knew was that the Light feared those they called the Dark so much that they had made the decision to try and destroy them for once and for all. The resulting fall out would mean

disaster for *Eagle* if she remained anywhere close to this inferno in the making.

"We're clearing the nebula in five minutes, twelve seconds," said Lance Stanmore from ops.

"Any sign of the yacht?" Owens said. He was not prepared to leave half his senior crew behind in Aphrodite when this place turned from a place of marvel into a death trap.

So'Dan Leva had returned to the bridge after receiving treatment for his injuries sustained after the runabout had crashed into the shuttle bay. He shook his head. "They are not on sensors and they are unable to penetrate into the nebula deep enough to make out their current position."

Michael headed for the tactical board to join his half-Romulan officer. "How much time do we have?"

"Difficult to say. But I am reading energy spikes off the chart. Whatever these creatures are doing to the planet, I'd venture it's very close to its climax."

A sudden bright light blinded everyone on the bridge before the automatic dimmer could reduce the glare. Michael feared the worst.

"Sir, I'm reading a massive shockwave originating from the general coordinates of the rogue planet," Stanmore said and turned to look at the captain. "Forty-five seconds to impact."

Owens glanced first at his tactical officer than down at the instruments himself to get an answer to his question. "The yacht?"

Leva shook his head.

Michael forced himself to reprioritize. If the yacht and his people were truly lost, he had to ensure that *Eagle* would not befall the same fate. "Mister Waldorf, can we outrun the shockwave?"

The Petty Officer manning helm consulted his instruments. "We need to channel all available power to the impulse engines. And even then it'll tight."

"Bridge to engineering."

"Hopkins here, sir."

"Lieutenant, I need everything you have for the impulse engines. I don't care if it blows out after, right now we need to get out of here. And leave something for aft shields. Everything else needs to be in the engines, including life support."

"You got it. Hopkins out."

He toggled the ship-wide next. "Attention all hands, this is the captain speaking. Brace for impact from shockwave in thirty seconds," he said and then headed back towards his seat to follow his own advice. "Mister Leva, whatever remaining power you can scrounge up goes into inertial dampers. Mister Waldorf, keep us up right and in front of that shockwave as long as you can. We may be able to ride it out."

The two men followed their instructions immediately.

And then he saw the wall of energy heading for his ship, looking for all purposes like a mercilessly powerful tsunami ready to blow away anything and everything unlucky enough to be caught in its path.

Michael could feel the ship protesting as it shook and trembled, experiencing far too much resistance from the nebula at this speed.

"Fifteen second to impact," said Stanmore, his voice strained.

"At least thirty seconds to nebula periphery.

"Engage all aft thrusters, give her as much forward momentum as we can," he said. He knew it wouldn't make any significant impact on their speed but if a few more kph would mean the difference between wounded or dead, he'd take anything he could get.

That shockwave was upon them now.

"Impact in ten," Stanmore said.

"All hands, brace, brace, brace." Owens held on to his chair as if his life depended on it.

And then he got a swift kick to his back. At least that's what it felt like as *Eagle* was rear-ended by the massive shockwave. He grunted in pain as his arms tried to dislocate themselves from his shoulders but he somehow and miraculously managed to stay in his seat. His vision was turning blurry as he felt forces pulling on his body far greater than what could have been considered medically safe.

The lights on the bridge dimmed and then gave out completely and various computer stations failed within seconds, leaving the bridge dark except for the bright light shining through the ceiling dome and the view screen.

On the viewer the shockwave was now a mass of swirling and furious energy but instead of crushing the ship, as he had feared, it remained steady, pushing *Eagle* along with it. They were riding it at the very top like a wind surfer taking on a far too large wave but having somehow found, by pure luck and circumstance, the perfect sweet spot to not be violently swallowed up by it.

"We're ... we're clearing ... the nebula," Stanmore said with great difficulty, his words sounding forced and heavily distorted.

And then just as quickly as it had grabbed them, it let go, the pressure slacked suddenly and Michael could feel the organs in his body re-arrange themselves again. On the screen the shockwave had fizzled out and the nebula came back into view but it appeared like a shadow of its former self. The bright crimson color which had given it its unique and enchanting beauty appeared nearly drained. The cloud looked somehow smaller and darker now, as if it had burned itself out after *Eagle* had been spat out like the unwelcomed visitors they had been.

"Impulse engines and thrusters are offline. We are drifting," Waldorf said. "Trying to reestablish attitude control."

The ship was tumbling uncontrollably away from the nebula but that wasn't Michael's greatest concern for now. He stood carefully and turned to find all of his bridge officers, relieved that nobody seemed to have been seriously injured in their crazy ride. "Damage report?"

Leva needed only a few seconds to collect the requested data. "We have ship-wide system failures. Warp drive and impulse are down. So are shields and defensive systems. Life support is running on emergency power. Reports of injuries are coming in across the ship. No significant casualties have been reported at this time."

Michael nodded, silently thanking their lucky stars and realizing that this could have ended far worse for his ship and crew. "Stabilizing life support is our priority."

The Romulan nodded and went to work to communicate those orders.

"Sir, I have a contact ... I think."

Michael turned towards ops. "What do you mean, you think?"

He shook his head in frustration. "Sensors are not reliable but whatever it is, it's in visual range."

The man didn't have to be told to put what he had found on the screen. When Owens looked up again he saw a black swirling mass at what he estimated to be just a few short kilometers from his ship. "What is that?"

"Not sure," said Stanmore. "Could be a spatial—"

"Something's emerging," said Leva.

Indeed a small starship came shooting out of the phenomenon not unlike the way *Eagle* had been ejected out of the nebula moments before.

Michael smiled when he recognized the familiar design.

"It's the yacht," Waldorf said but by then nobody had to be told anymore.

The black mass from which it had emerged vanished moments later, leaving only the small vessel which seemed to be tumbling with no control and again not unlike her mother ship.

"Hail them," Owens said.

"Communications are down," the tactical officer responded.

"Transporters?" he said and looked at the Romulan.

He shook his head.

Michael glanced back towards the screen where the small support vessel was still approaching. "Any ideas how we bring them on board then?"

Nobody on the bridge seemed to have one. Both shuttle bays were still unavailable and with no attitude control it was impossible for them to maneuver in order to dock with the yacht.

For a moment everybody simply watched the small ship tumble towards them. "Somebody tell me, are we on a collision course?" Owens said.

Waldorf nodded. "Uh, yes, sir. Impact in sixty seconds."

The relief of finding his away team hopefully alive inside the craft was quickly replaced by his fear of crushing the smaller ship in mere moments. "And we can't get out of the way?"

"No, sir," said the veteran helmsman. "At our present speed and orientation the yacht will impact against the saucer section on deck four, section nine through eight."

Owens whipped around to find his tactical officer. "Evacuate those areas," he said and turned back towards the impending space collision. "Tractor beam?"

Stanmore shook his head. "Unavailable, sir."

"Hopkins, I know you're busy down there but I could really use some thrusters right about now."

The chief engineer came on the line a moment later. "*I wish I could, sir. It'll take me hours to get them back online.*"

"How about just one? And we don't need much, just enough to arrest our momentum a little bit," Owens said.

"I see what I can do."

"Make it quick, please."

And with that Owens and the rest of the bridge crew were left to watch quietly as the yacht moved closer and closer, clearly just as unable to navigate on its own power as *Eagle* and avoid what seemed to be an impending and possibly devastating collision.

"Ten seconds to impact," Waldorf said.

Owens glanced towards tactical.

"All affected sections have been cleared."

"I have one forward thruster firing," said Waldorf but then quickly shook his head. "It stopped. It wasn't enough, we'll still hit the yacht. Twenty-two seconds."

Hopkins had come through. As little as it had been, at least it would lessen the force of the impact.

Something else occurred to Michael then. Their sudden movement had altered their altitude somewhat. "She's heading straight for us."

Stanmore checked his board. "Confirmed. The yacht is now on a collision course with the bridge module."

"Clear the room," Owens said.

Stanmore and Waldorf jumped out of their seats and headed for the nearest turbolift while Owens stepped closer to the screen which was now completely dominated by the oval-shaped vessel tumbling uncontrollably towards them.

Leva stepped up next to him. "Sir, bridge is clear. We need to go."

But Michael didn't move. Instead he watched with a mixture of dread and fascination as the yacht hit *Eagle's* saucer somewhere just below them at around deck three, he guessed. He felt the impact through the rattling deck plates and then looked on as the small craft continued upwards along the hull, peeling off paint and blowing up sparks as it went along.

Michael took an instinctive step backwards when it became unmistakably clear that it was heading straight for the bridge.

He didn't need to have bothered. The yacht came to screeching stop mere feet from the raised module right on the very top of the saucer module.

In fact it was so close, he could see into its forward viewport where he could see the faces of Xylion, Culsten, Deen and Star.

The first officer offered a salute and a large smile.

The captain frowned. "Somebody's going to pay for that paint job."

- II -

"I expect warp drive and impulse to be back online within the next two hours. Shields should be at full strength again in about three. We suffered structural damage to a number of areas on the saucer. I have temporary fixes in place within four hours, it won't be much but enough to get us back to the nearest starbase," said Louise Hopkins as she summed up the damage report in the observation lounge where the entire senior staff had assembled.

Owens gave her a nod and looked at Doctor Katanga next.

"We were lucky," he said. "Very lucky. Sickbay is still filled with injured crewmen but I've got nobody left in critical condition and we had no fatalities. Ensign Srena is on the mend also and I think I should be able to release her tomorrow or the day after. She'll be ready to return to duty early next week after some bed rest."

"Very good," the captain said. "The young woman did an outstanding job and commendations are in order."

Tazla Star nodded to this. It was no secret that she had taken an interest in the Andorian's career and had acted a little bit like a mentor to her. "I'll ensure her record will reflect her efforts in identifying the alien life forms."

"Speaking of which," said Owens, "have we been able to reestablish communications with them?"

Commander Xylion took that one. "No. We have been unable to communicate or detect any of the nebula entities since the rogue planetoid was destroyed. We are also unable to reenter Aphrodite as the thermionic radiation has increased by 125% likely as an unexpected consequence of the planet's obliteration. It will prevent any kind of excursion into the nebula even with the use of transphasic shielding."

"What about these life forms you've encountered on that planet?" said Katanga. "What did they call it? The Dark? Do you think they were destroyed?"

"It is possible," said Deen, "but we have no way of knowing at this point. We don't even know if the Light survived."

The doctor shook his head sadly. "What a complete waste. Two sentient life forms possibly annihilated and for what? Because they mistrusted each other? You know none of this would have happened if we had just stayed the hell away."

The room fell silent for a moment.

"Sooner or later we would have come here anyway," Owens concluded. "Yes, we came here for military reasons. To give us a better chance in fighting and winning a war. But let's not forget that we are explorers first. We would have come here eventually to learn more about Aphrodite and the results would likely have been much the same. Maybe even worse. In the end it is the price we pay for our own curiosity."

"Perhaps the cost is too high," said Katanga.

"We cannot be held responsible for the actions of other races, Eli," said Star and then quickly continued when he was beginning to object. "We didn't come here with the intention of starting a war. That conflict between the Light and the Dark clearly had been ongoing for a long time before we ever got here. And it certainly wasn't our idea to blow up an entire planet. If the Light had shown some more patience we may have been able to come up with an alternative and more peaceful solution."

But Katanga wasn't entirely satisfied with that response. "Maybe, maybe not. But my point still stands. Had it not been for our interference, one or maybe even two sentient races may yet exist."

"We don't know for certain that they are truly gone," said DeMara Deen, as usual being the most optimistic voice on the crew.

Owens nodded. "That's right. And it looks like it'll take a long time for us to find out."

Xylion spoke up next. "Regardless of the level of influence our actions have had on the events taking place inside the nebula, we must address my personal decisions and the consequences they have had on this crew."

At this Deen smirked. "You mean you deciding to stay on a planet with malicious alien life forms masquerading as Vulcans so they could sap your DNA when I had told you not to?"

Xylion raised an eyebrow.

"As far as I'm concerned, Commander," said Owens, "you did what you had to in order to ensure the away team could safely return to the ship and a fatally injured crewmember would receive the care she needed."

“Sir, I was deceived by these creatures and my actions put this ship and crew into additional jeopardy when you attempted a rescue mission.”

“Dear God, man,” said Katanga, “be able to take a no-harm, no foul and move on.”

Xylion regarded the other man. “It is only logical, Doctor that I’d be reprimanded for –”

“Glutton for punishment, eh?” he said, cutting off the science officer. “I remember Bones warning me about Vulcan science officers. He wasn’t wrong.”

Owens inserted himself before the conversation could escalate any further. “There will be no need for punishment as far as I’m concerned,” he said and then continued when he realized that the science officer didn’t appear satisfied with that outcome. “However, I’ll make sure your file will contain a full breakdown of events which transpired on that planet. Will that satisfy logic, Commander?”

“It will. Thank you, Captain.”

There were smiles and smirks all around the table.

“Bridge to observation lounge.”

Owens looked up and towards the ceiling from which Lieutenant Stanmore’s voice had come over the speakers. “This is Owens, go ahead.”

“Sir, we have contact emerging from the nebula.”

“Red alert, raise shields,” Star said immediately which was followed not a moment later by the flashing crimson lights and hailing klaxons.

“I don’t believe that will be necessary,” said Nora and pointed out of the windows which were facing the now much murkier and less marvelous Aphrodite nebula. Something had just come tumbling out of the thick fog and it became quickly obvious to everyone in the room that it posed little threat to the ship.

“Cancel red alert,” said Star when she realized what it was.

Standard illumination was restored.

What remained of the sensor array was spinning end over end into open space. Most of its scanning platforms had ripped off, most likely on impact with the shockwave and the entire thing looked rather sad as it shed components with each rotation.

“The professor will not be happy,” said Owens.

"I'm actually more concerned with Colcord. She doesn't take bad news very well," said the chief engineer still watching the demolished sensor array tumbling away as the only proof of the hard work she and her team had been involved in over the better part of the week.

"I supposed we have to go and catch it," said Leva.

"That's not our priority right now," said the captain and then looked towards Star. "There are still a few other loose ends to tie up regarding murder investigations and sabotage."

Nora, who had said little to this point, spoke up. "There wasn't a murder. We now know that it was an accident caused by that life form taking over Lieutenant Kolrami's body."

He nodded. "What about Crewman Decaux and her taking engineering hostage?"

"She was an eyewitness to the event. She actually saw Kolrami shove Gedar down the warp core pit. To her credit, she even speculated at one point that alien beings may have been responsible long before we had any inkling."

"And she didn't come forward?" Owens said and frowned.

"Miss Decaux is unfortunately suffering from a rather severe personality disorder which they must have missed during routines psychological evaluations," said Doctor Katanga. "Since the war they've clearly been cutting left, right and center on the work ups they do on new recruits. It's unconscionable."

"You're saying she shouldn't be wearing the uniform?" asked Star.

He quickly shook his head. "No. There is absolutely no reason she couldn't be an effective member of the crew. There are treatment methods and medication available which I would like to discuss with her and her counselor at the earliest convenience."

"She still needs to be held responsible for the actions she took," said Owens. "She could have killed Lieutenant Nora in her escape attempt, not to mention Lieutenant Kolrami. And that's not even taking into account that she put the entire ship and crew at great risk when she took main engineering hostage."

But Star clearly didn't agree. "I think that she was driven to that point because we failed her. I don't mean to say us in particular but Starfleet in general. I don't think she should be punished for that."

"I agree."

The room fell dead silent and all eyes turned to the most unlikely person to have uttered those words.

"What?" Nora Laas said. "The Commander is right. Decaux needs our help and our empathy, not our scorn. She's a young woman who wasn't ready for the pain she experienced and considering her condition, she wasn't mentally prepared for what she went through."

"Okay," said Leva with a smirk after looking first at Nora and then at Star and the rest of the senior staff. "I clearly missed a lot more happening on this ship than I thought."

But the Bajoran security chief simply crossed her arms and leaned back in her chair, clearly not interested on discussing this matter further after she had made her views known.

Eventually Owens nodded. "Very well, I'll consider leniency given the circumstances. That leaves us with just one other issue. Do I still have to worry about a spy on *Eagle*?"

There was no immediate response to this and Owens didn't miss that Star seemed suddenly reluctant to talk. The same was true for Nora Laas, Lif Culsten and surprisingly even Louise Hopkins, all trying to avoid eye contact with the captain.

"I understand that the odd behavior of some of the crew was solely due to the possessions by the nebula entities," he continued when nobody else spoke. "I have no intention of holding anyone accountable for those but there was other evidence which seemed to hint at a possible spy," he said and then looked straight at the first officer. "Commander?"

She nodded slowly. "My investigation is ongoing but at this point I don't think we have enough evidence. My preliminary report shows that there is nobody on this ship currently involved in any form of espionage."

Owens looked towards his security chief.

"That is my conclusions as well."

Another silence.

Leva and Deen exchanged a look as if to ask since when Star and Nora agreed on anything. Not to mention twice in the same meeting.

The captain nodded. "I still expect a full report. But if there is no further or credible evidence to support this theory I am happy to put it to bed. I don't believe in witch hunts."

“You’ll have my full report within the next couple of days,” Star said.

“Alright folks, that’s it, I guess. Let’s get those repairs completed. We still have to go catch a rogue sensor array,” he said and stood, signaling the end of the meeting and causing his officers to leave their chairs and head for the exits.

- III -

Alex Clancy found her in the lower level of the Nest, standing close to the large forward floor-to-ceiling windows and staring at that pulsing cloud which had once captured the fascinated attention of most of the crew. The marvel had long gone and not just because of the revelation that Aphrodite had contained life forms which had possessed a number of *Eagle's* crewmembers. The unique nebula had also almost become a death trap for the ship and once it had been spat out, it had lost much of its stunning bright and beautiful colors and turned into an almost gray and unappealing mass, not unlike a thick cloud of smog or dust.

"How did it go?" he said as he joined her.

"About as expected," Nora said without otherwise acknowledging his presence. "The captain has formally closed the investigation."

"How does that make you feel?"

She turned her head to glower at him.

Clancy quickly raised his hands. "Sorry, old habits," he said. "But I can tell you that I feel somewhat unsatisfied by the whole thing. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy that we don't have a bloodthirsty killer on board but after all the work we put into the investigation, it would have been nice to have some sort of pay off."

She nodded and looked back out of the window.

"Of course it's not as if we didn't uncover plenty of other untoward behavior. There's Gedar's seemingly out of control love life and the many people who wouldn't have minded teaching him a lesson; then of course the fact that Charlie Colcord stole her fancy shield modifications from him back at the Academy and whatever was going on between him, Culsten and Hopkins."

That garnered him another sharp glance. "It doesn't matter anymore."

He held that look for a moment and then nodded slowly. "I have my own theories about that," he said but then quickly continued when he noticed her less than pleased expression. "However I think I'm just going to keep all those to myself."

"See that you do."

For a moment they simply stood there, side-by-side, staring at what remained of Aphrodite together.

“For what it is worth, Lieutenant,” he said, “it was a pleasure working with you on this case. I thought we actually made a pretty good team.”

“Yeah, we did, didn’t we?”

He couldn’t help but smile at that. “Well, I shall leave you to it then. And I suppose it would be inappropriate for me to wish that we will work together again considering that it would mean another murder or the like,” he said and turned away to head towards the exit.

“Alex.”

He stopped and looked back.

Nora took a couple of steps towards him and they faced each other. “I might enjoy that, too. Without the murder of course.”

“What do you say I buy you a drink?”

The Bajoran smirked. “What is it with humans and that idiom? There are no drinks to be bought on this ship.”

He shrugged. “I suppose it just has a ring to it.”

But her face turned serious again.

“Laas, sometimes it just helps to talk.”

She looked at him suspiciously. “To a counselor?”

“How about to a friend?” he said and held out his hand.

Nora looked at it for a moment as if she had never seen an outstretched hand in her life. Then she nodded and shook it.

Together they walked over to a nearby table, ordered drinks and started talking for a long time.

- IV -

“Commander Star, please report to sickbay.”

Tazla had been dreading this moment. Ever since Katanga had confronted her in the turbolift a few days earlier after having found out about her substance abuse issues. She had known that she wouldn't be able to avoid it. He had given her some leeway to try and deal with this situation herself but now that their latest crisis was concluded, he had decided that he had waited long enough.

She wasn't exactly sure how she was going to play it. There hadn't really been much time to give the matter a great deal of thought with everything that had been going on. Perhaps subconsciously she had hoped that her old friend would simply let the matter slide, continue the status quo unchallenged. Now, as it turned out, that had been nothing more than a fantasy.

So in the end all she could do was take a deep breath and head for sickbay, hoping she could find a way to talk Katanga out of reporting her condition. She had only just made inroads both with the captain and, surprisingly, Nora Laas, and for the first time since coming aboard the ship she was beginning to feel like she really was the first officer. For the first time in a long time she felt as if she belonged and she liked feeling that way. Katanga could take all that away in a heartbeat.

She entered sickbay and found the room still busy with patients from the beating they had taken inside the nebula. Ensign Srena was among the patients and Star smiled when she saw her awake and seemingly well, chatting excitedly with another officer. When she noticed that it was Lieutenant Lance Stanmore that smile dropped from her face and she stepped closer.

“Commander,” Srena said and quickly sat up straighter on the bio bed.

Stanmore stood from where he had been sitting. *“Sir.”*

She considered the two young officers for a moment before she focused on the Andorian. *“How are you feeling, Ensign?”*

“Pretty well considering the circumstances,” she said. *“Doc says I should be able to return to my quarters tomorrow.”* When she noticed that the first officer was considering her visitor she quickly continued.

“Uh, the lieutenant just stopped by to fill me in on what happened while I was out.”

“Sure he did,” she said.

“Perhaps I’ll fill you in later,” said Stanmore. “Commander,” he added and then left sickbay.

Star stepped up next to the bed instead. “You did good work, Ensign, I can’t wait to read your report.”

“Thanks, Commander. Just wish I hadn’t been caught off guard by those Vulcans or whatever they were.”

“From what I’ve heard they were pretty powerful aliens. You might not have been able to fight them off even if you had been prepared.”

But the Andorian refused to have that change her mind.

Star put a hand on her shoulder. “You did excellent work on your analysis. Commander Xylion has already asked for you to spend some extra time in the lab with him to hone those skills further.”

“Really?” she said and smirked, her blue antennae standing at attention. “I’d love that.”

“Stow that enthusiasm until you realize what the extra work load will mean. You won’t have much time left for extracurricular activities,” she said and shot a brief glance towards the doors which Stanmore had used moments before.

Srena nodded. “I understand. No distractions.”

The Trill looked the young woman over for a moment. “Perhaps just a tiny bit of distractions,” she said with a smirk, holding her finger and thumb an inch apart.

The Andorian returned the smile.

She patted her shoulder again. “Now get some rest. I expect to have that report as soon as they let you get out of here.”

“Yes, sir.”

Star turned and headed for the CMO’s office at the far end of sickbay, bracing herself for a much more difficult and painful conversation. She froze when she reached the doorstep, immediately realizing that this was going to be far worse than she had anticipated.

“Ah, Commander,” said Captain Michael Owens who stood on the opposite side of Katanga’s desk and had turned towards her when she had appeared. “There you are.”

"Captain," she said carefully and then glanced at Katanga behind his desk, trying hard to keep her face free from showing her feelings of hurt and betrayal which had gripped her suddenly. She had expected having to face him regarding her drug problem, but she hadn't thought that he'd go straight to the captain with it. At least not so soon.

"We were just talking about you," Owens said.

Star nodded but said nothing, trying to come up with a defense for her actions on the spot. One which would not end up with her spending the rest of her career in the stockade. She had been there once and sworn never to return. Now she wasn't so sure if she could keep her own promise.

"The good doctor just regaled me with some interesting stories about your former host Dezwin. I can see now where you get your drive from," said the captain.

"Actually we probably have to thank Lersus, my third host for that. The man was nothing but an adrenaline junkie. Compared to him I'm a meek little Tarkalean sheep."

"Meek, right," said Katanga. "Just the word I'd think of when we're talking about you."

Owens smirked at that. "Don't sell yourself short, Commander. I know we've had our problems but you've done a hell of a job to prove to me once and for all that we didn't make a mistake in keeping you here. That you belong in that uniform and on this ship."

"Is that what you do with your new officers, Captain?" said Katanga, sounding like his feisty self. "Make them jump through various hoops until you are satisfied that they can jump high enough? Makes me wonder what you have in store for me exactly."

Owens frowned at the other man. It didn't last. "Whatever it takes to ensure you wear the complete uniform, Doctor," he said, noticing that the man was still stubbornly refusing to wear the gray and black jacket.

"Let's make a deal," said Katanga. "I'll make sure I look like a prim and prom good little soldier when I'm up on that bridge sitting in that chair right next to yours. But when I'm down here you let me wear whatever the hell I please."

"I suppose I can live with that."

Katanga smirked and looked at Star who still stood near the door. "See and you said he was difficult."

Owens regarded his first officer. "Did you now?"

She shook her head ever so slightly. "I don't believe those were my exact words, sir."

He stepped up to her and offered a smile. "Relax, Commander, you look like a first year cadet in the commandant's office."

"Can we assume that is a situation you are fairly familiar with, Captain?" said Katanga, leaning back in his chair with a wide grin decorating his dark face.

Owens glanced back at the man. "Keep an eye on that ice your treading on, Doctor, it may thin quicker than you thought," he said but his playful tone gave proof he wasn't being entirely serious.

"You're looking at a man who has made a career out of walking on thin ice."

Star was done waiting for the inevitable, better to cut right to the chase. She addressed the captain. "Sir, you wanted to see me."

Owens regarded her again and then threw a thumb over his shoulder. "That was the Doctor. I was just in the neighborhood and I thought I'll tell you what a good job you've been doing."

She cringed slightly when he realized that those had been almost the exact same words she had offered to Srena minutes before. What went around.

"How about we have breakfast tomorrow morning in my quarters and we can have a chat about your future role on this ship?" he said and then looked back at Katanga. "You are also invited, of course."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," he said.

"I'll be there, sir."

"Excellent, then. Carry on," he said and then left the room, leaving Star and Katanga behind.

The first officer visibly relaxed her shoulders the moment he had disappeared and then looked at the man sitting at the desk. "You didn't tell him?"

"Tazla Dezwin Sigus Star," he said in an admonishing tone. "What kind of monster do you think I am?"

She smirked a little. "You know just Taz will do," she said and then sat in the empty chair facing his desk. "And I'm sorry I couldn't help but fear the worst when I saw him in here and after that little chat we had the other day."

“There is something called doctor-patient confidentiality which I happen to take very seriously,” he said. “I won’t tell a soul about your condition.”

She exhaled. “Thank you, I really mean it.”

“Under one condition.”

Her features hardened. “You are blackmailing me?”

Katanga stood and walked over to her side of the desk, shaking his head slightly. “I’m worried, Taz. You are showing all the symptoms of yridium tricantazine addiction. Besides the fact that this drug is causing significant damage to your mind and body, you will simply not be able to keep it a secret for much longer. And when it comes out, your career will be over.”

“I know that.”

“Then we have to do something about it.”

She shook her head. “I already tried. There is no cure. I tried hyperzine for a while but it didn’t work.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said and looked straight into her eyes. “You are going to tell me everything that has happened that led you to this point and this addiction. You’ll tell me everything you’ve ever taken, the dosages, the drugs, what times and what the effects were exactly. We’re going to go through this step by step if we have to and then we are going to start thinking about beating this thing. I’d be lying to you if I said it’d be easy, quick or painless but it is possible. But I will need your full commitment to this. Nothing else will do.”

“And you think we can do it without anyone else finding out?”

“We sure are going to try.”

She took a deep breath, considering for a moment what was at stake. Her assignment on *Eagle*, her career, her life, really. It had taken her a long time to get to a point where she actually cared for herself and those people around her again. Where she wanted to keep what she had fought so hard to achieve. She understood something then and there. Sometimes you had to fight with tooth and nail to hang on to what you had. And sometimes it meant more than picking up a phaser.

She looked up at him “When do we start?”

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