

Star Trek: Pytheas Broken Bridges

By Brother Benny

*Thanks go to Heather Jarman (Worlds of Deep Space Nine: Andor: Paradigm)
for the Andorian work.*

Historian's Note: *This story takes place from early July to mid September 2378;
beginning approximately three weeks after the events of The Art of War.*

Prologue

Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards

Mars orbit

Stardate 55513.6 (July 7, 2378)

Captain Leza Astar glanced out the window at her ship in drydock, surrounded by a full scaffold. The bridge module would be replaced and the outer hull would be patched up as good as new. The interior was to be refitted for the open-ended mission that the *Pytheas* was supposed to be undertaking and there was the small matter of the replacement shuttlecraft to be delivered as well. Astar took another look at the padd in her hand and sighed. She was officially on administrative leave, pending a court-martial hearing because of her actions in the Kursican sector and the mirror universe, and Command had yet to provide her with a new first officer. They believed, as she did, that Gonzales wasn't ready, and although there were several candidates, they had yet to make a decision—it wasn't hers to make. Presumably they would wait until after the court-martial to determine who the first officer would be, and whether or not a new commanding officer would also be needed.

Astar nodded to the Guardian as he left her quarters and sat down in the recliner closest to the window. She was tired after her Zhian'tara, and it had raised more questions than it had answered, but the Guardians and the Symbiosis Commission had agreed that both she and the symbiont were now

safe. The information was no longer buried and threatening to kill both of them, but as she was on administrative leave, she was not able to pursue the answers to those questions. With her ship off limits to her crew during the refit, many of them had returned to their homeworlds for leave or debriefing, or were just hanging around waiting for reassignment. Though it had only been four months for most of them, the refit, which was expected to take at least twelve weeks (of which three had already elapsed) warranted leave.

'Come,' Astar said as the door chimed. She turned to face the visitor and immediately stood at attention.

'At ease, Captain,' Admiral Janeway said and looked out the window as well. 'She needs a lot of work.'

'Yes ma'am, she does.'

'I've been reviewing your logs, and I've been speaking with Captain Logan and his staff. Your tactics were sound, and the Cha'lav have been dealt a severe blow. Command is also debating whether or not to replace the Platform with a newer starbase and Captain Logan apparently does not agree. Would you know why?'

'The weapons systems,' Astar replied. '*Starbase 535* currently has a combination of Kursican and Starfleet weaponry and Starfleet isn't happy about it. They would prefer to have a completely new starbase there with Federation technology. It also gives them an opportunity to prevent the Kursicans from having the run of the starbase.'

'The Kursicans have withdrawn their petition for Federation membership and as such would like their starbase returned to them,' Janeway said.

'So give it back to them. Put the new starbase in the Ynelavii system. They have entered a petition for Federation membership, I believe.'

Janeway nodded. 'They have, but that wasn't actually what I came to discuss with you.'

'It wasn't?'

'No, I'm aware that you've just been through the Zhian'tara and I was hoping you could tell me what came up during the ritual with regards to the Xindi.'

'How did you know about that, Admiral?'

'One of your previous hosts was the Federation ambassador on New Xindus in the early twenty-third century. I'd like to know what happened there to sour diplomatic relations and force the signing of the North Star Accords.'

'It's very simple, Captain. A group of Xindi-Reptilians and Insectoids engineered a coup d'etat and overthrew the Xindi council. Since it was an internal matter we couldn't intervene and were asked to leave. We went to the Federation embassy on North Star to see what happened by the Reptilians tried to make us leave the Expanse. It was fortuitous that Captain Archer had found the Skagaran homeworld in his career as two Skagaran vessels arrived to protect the colony in response to our distress call.'

'What happened then?'

'The exiled Council was able to retake New Xindus during the Battle of North Star and the dissidents were exiled. My former host signed the North Star Accords which ceded North Star and a triangular section of the Expanse to the Federation, and the rest to the New Xindus Republic. The only problem is that we've never had a base of operations or a starship in that area so the Xindi have crossed our border with impunity.'

'Until the Skagarans joined the Federation?'

'Right, then everything went pear-shaped and the Skagarans claimed that section of the Expanse for themselves and we let them have it as part of the agreement in joining the Federation. The Xindi and the Skagarans have been at war ever since.'

'Why hasn't Starfleet got involved?'

'We were too busy chasing away the Klingons, the Romulans, the Cardassians, the Borg and then the Dominion to have any spare ships to assist the Skagarans.'

Janeway sighed. 'I'm placing you back on active duty. I want you to enter the Expanse, go to New Xindus and repair diplomatic relations at any cost. Even if it means ceding the entire Expanse to them. I will grant you a ship and crew to assist you.'

'I'd like to take my senior officers with me.'

'Those that are still around, of course. Give me twenty-four hours and contact me if I haven't contacted you after that time.'

'Aye ma'am.'

'We'll talk soon,' Janeway replied and left Astar's temporary quarters.

Astar thought about her career and the advancement that might come if she was successful. She tapped her combadge. 'Astar to Gonzales.'

'Yes, Captain?'

'Meet me in my quarters on the Central Complex immediately. We have something to discuss. Round up the senior officers.'

'Aye sir, I gave Talen the Scobee so he could go home.'

'That's not a problem, get everybody else together.'

'Aye sir, Gonzales out.'

While she waited for her officers to arrive, she searched the local database for any vessels that were docked and unassigned which Janeway could pick for the mission. She saw two and wondered which one it was going to be.'

Chapter One

Shuttlecraft *Scobee*

En route to Andor

Stardate 55513.7 (July 7, 2378)

Lieutenant Shanitalen ch'Maras sat in the aft section of the shuttlecraft to meditate while he journeyed home to find a new trio of bondmates with which to enter into the Sheltreth. Although he still felt angry toward his former bondmates, he knew they had made the right decision in looking for someone else. He couldn't have said when he would be back and they were unable to wait. The ch'Thane Genome Project had made great strides in finding compatible bondmates and the reduction in mortality rates and infertile Sheltreth was far greater than at any time in the last century, but there was still the question as to what had caused the reproductive crisis in the first place. Talen knew that he would need to contact the Genome Project to find compatible bondmates, but he was also hoping to find out more about his people's problems, considering the fact that he might be able to assist them with the classified information from the Cha'lav medical database, which was far more advanced than the Federation's.

The computer chirped and he opened his eyes. *'Incoming transmission from USS Laikan.'*

A ship named after the Andorian capital was likely crewed by Andorians, Talen thought and made his way forward. *'On screen.'*

'Acknowledged.'

'Lieutenant ch'Maras, this is Captain th'Dolus of the Laikan. I have a guest who would like you to come aboard.'

'Of course, sir. I'd be delighted, but I am on my way to Andor for a meeting with the Genome Project.'

'We're heading home ourselves, Lieutenant, and my ship is faster than yours,' th'Dolus replied and Talen smothered a grin.

'Yes sir.'

'Put the shuttle on autopilot and we'll bring you in, th'Dolus out.'

Talen's antennae quivered and he knew he was intrigued. 'Computer, current data on USS Laikan.'

'USS Laikan is a Nova-class starship, launched stardate 52635, permanently assigned to the Andor sector for scientific research. The chief science officer is renowned geneticist Lieutenant Thirishar ch'Thane, founder of the ch'Thane Genome Project in 2376.'

'Thanks,' Talen replied as his shuttle docked with the starship.

He opened the side hatch and saw three people there to greet him. 'Permission to come aboard, sir,' Talen asked the captain.

'Granted. This is my first officer, Granapirto zh'Share, and I'm sure you know my chief science officer.'

'Yes sir, I do. A pleasure to meet you all.'

'Captain, Commander, with all due respect, I have some questions for our young guest.'

'Th'Dolus waved his hand in dismissal. I know when I'm not needed. Come, Commander. That stellar nursery will not chart itself.'

'Aye sir,' the woman replied and followed her commanding officer, shooting an annoyed glance at the newcomer.

'Don't mind her, she's still mad that my security clearance is higher than hers.'

'Mine isn't very high,' Talen replied.

'On the contrary, Talen, yours is almost as high as mine because of your knowledge of the Cha'lav database.'

'How do you know my name and how do you know about that?'

'My security clearance allows me access to anything that could impact our people, and the Cha'lav database is just such a thing. Because of the Yrythny eggs I bought back from the Gamma Quadrant, I was able to lengthen the window of fertility and increase the number of children born from each bonding. My next project is to discover what caused the crisis in the first place, and then solve it completely. I believe that your database can help me with that.'

'I don't have access to the medical database anymore, it was downloaded to Starfleet Tactical.'

'I have a complete copy of the Cha'lav database in a secured computer core on board. We're delivering it to Andor so I can continue my work with all the technology the Federation has at it's disposal. What I need from you, is the knowledge you've gained by examining the database.'

Talen smiled. 'That's the very reason I was going to meet with the scientists at the Genome Project, to offer my knowledge of the database to find out why we are the way we are.'

'Explain?'

'Why do we need four genders to procreate? Our mythology tells us we were split into four by Uzaveh the Infinite, and I believe it has a basis in fact, but there must be a more logical reason for it. And the only place to find that reason is to find the Cradle of Life, which I believe is Tower Hill, where the Breaking occurred.'

'And you think that when we find that, we'll find the reason for the breaking and a way to fix our quadruple genders?'

'I do.'

Ch'Thane considered the proposal and then nodded. 'ch'Thane to Captain.'

'Go ahead, Lieutenant.'

'When we get home, I need a full science and security team on Tower Hill.'

'Lieutenant, you do realise that Tower Hill is one of our most sacred sites.'

'I am aware of its cultural and mythological significance, sir, but Lieutenant ch'Maras has a theory that I believe we should examine.'

'I'll speak with the Parliament Andoria, but I don't think the Chancellor will like it very much; th'Dolus out.'

'Damn politicians,' ch'Thane muttered.

'They're the same everywhere,' ch'Maras replied.

'Indeed. Now, what do you expect to find at Tower Hill?'

'There should be a marker that signifies where the Breaking occurred, but it won't be anything as simple as a stone that says "here's where it happened".'

Ch'Thane frowned. 'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying that I don't believe Uzaveh was Andorian, I think he was an alien from another world—and the only way we'll be able to fix this is by contacting his people and getting them to reverse the process.'

'If we get an audience with the Chancellor, don't say any of that, just say that you believe the answer to our problem lies at the beginning of our people. The Chancellor will have you executed for the blasphemy, even if it does turn out to be true. The Tale of the Breaking has been part of our mythology for centuries, you can't expect people to change overnight.'

'It may not be true,' Talen admitted, 'but there's only one way we'll find out.'

Chapter Two

Utopia Planitia Fleet Yards

Mars orbit

Stardate 55516.3 (July 8, 2378)

Captain Astar joined her senior officers in the conference room they'd been directed to, and waited for Admiral Janeway to enter. The newly-minted admiral hadn't given a reason, just an order, that they all be there by ten hundred hours. They'd been waiting for several minutes before she actually entered the room, and were surprised to see three Xindi officers, including Lieutenant Queran, the *Pytheas*' deputy chief engineer. All three wore their uniforms but none had their combadges or rank insignia.

'Before you ask, Captain,' Janeway started, 'they have been officially relieved of duty and stripped of commission. They will be bargaining chips for your mission into the expanse.'

'Excuse me?'

'You will officially be in command of a Starfleet Security vessel returning these people back to their homeworld in disgrace.'

All three officers winced.

'Unacceptable, Admiral,' Astar replied. 'Their careers will be over if this goes ahead, regardless of our success in the Expanse.'

'The decision has already been made,' Janeway replied. 'They are to be kept confined at all times. I will be sending along an observer to make sure you obey those orders and if you deviate from them, he'll be authorised to take command of the ship and mission.'

Astar stepped forward. 'I officially protest these orders and will file a complaint with the Commander-in-Chief, the Federation Council, and the President.'

Janeway sighed. 'Go ahead, but I felt it was necessary in order to allow you safe passage through the Expanse.'

'The Skagarans won't make the distinction between Starfleet Xindi and Republican Xindi, they'll still fire on us, Federation vessel or not.'

'I will be speaking with the Skagaran ambassador and the Federation Council regarding the war in the Expanse. Your job is to get the Xindi back on our side.'

'What vessel are we assigned to?'

'The *Gibraltar*, she's on loan from the Border Service.'

'Captain Sandhurst's ship?'

'It hasn't been his ship for almost a year, Captain. You're out of touch.'

'It was his ship when I met him as a Commander during the Vanguard mission, Admiral.'

'That was almost a year ago, Captain, a lot can change.'

'Indeed it can. How soon do we leave?'

'As soon as the observer arrives from Earth.'

'Who is our chaperone?'

The door to the conference room opened and a familiar face entered.
'Admiral, I believe you requested my presence.'

'What are you doing here, Captain?' Astar asked.

Lionel Logan glanced at her. 'I've been assigned to Admiral Janeway's office. I will accompany you to New Xindus.'

'You will accord him every courtesy,' Janeway added. 'The *Gibraltar* is waiting for you at berth fifteen starboard.'

'Aye sir,' Astar replied as Janeway left.

'Shall we go?' Logan asked.

'Come on people, let's move out,' Astar ordered and turned to Queran. 'I'm sorry about this, and I will do everything I can to get you all back to work.'

'Thank you, Captain,' Queran said as security officers arrived to escort the Xindi to the ship.

'Confine them to quarters,' Logan told security.

'Aye sir,' the lead officer replied. 'One guard will be posted outside each of their quarters.'

Logan nodded and Astar gave him a look. 'No reason they should be in the brig. I've already logged my official protest.'

'Thank you.'

'No problem.'

The two of them walked in silence from the conference room to the berth where the *Constitution*-class starship was docked. The ship had been through a tumultuous time under the captaincy of Donald Sandhurst, and then she was supposed to have been refitted as a hospital ship for the Border Service. Logan told her that because of the tactical upgrades the ship was fitted with for Operation Indemnity—ousting the neo-Maquis from the Badlands over a year ago—she had been tasked with dangerous missions for the Border Service and Starfleet, and had never quite made it to the major refit. This was to be just one more dangerous mission for the *Gibraltar*, but Astar knew what Xindi technology was like, and she had no idea how much they had improved over the last century. At best the old starship would be out-gunned, at worst...she didn't want to think about what that might mean.

'What a bucket of bolts!' Lieutenant Commander Xeris exclaimed as he laid eyes on the *Constitution*-class ship. 'How did the chief engineer manage to keep that thing running?'

'The hull might be old, Commander, but everything inside is up to modern specs, including the warp core.'

Xeris shook his head. 'I'll be surprised if we come out of this in one piece.'

'As long as it has phasers and torpedoes, we'll be fine.'

'You will all get a briefing pack on what the ship has been through, its strengths and weaknesses, and we leave in twenty-four hours. Captain Astar?'

'Dismissed, I want that ship ready to go in eighteen hours.'

A chorus of ayes echoed down the corridor as her crew disappeared into the ship.

'The Admiral said twenty-four.'

'I want this mission over and done with,' Astar replied. 'It will be dangerous and we'll have enemies on all sides because there are Xindi aboard. The Skagarans will attack us, regardless of whether we're a Federation starship or not.'

'And they're members?'

'Yes, they are. Would the Admiral prefer both to be members, or just diplomatic relations to be restored, even at the cost of the Skagaran membership?'

'Getting the Xindi as members is not possible given their xenophobic tendencies, but yes, restoration of diplomatic relations is a must, regardless of the Skagarans' position.'

'That will be difficult, all the more so with the Xindi officers on board. Why do we have them anyway?'

Logan looked around and then pulled Astar into the corridor that led to the ship. 'Apparently, President Satie is trying to remove officers from non-member or non-associate to combat the growing threat of anti-Federation sentiment in the galaxy.'

'That will only make it worse,' Astar protested.

'It's only a rumour, but it explains a few things.'

'She'll never get re-elected if the public found out about that.'

Logan offered a raised eyebrow in response.

'I see.'

Chapter Three

USS *Laikan*

En route to Andor

Stardate 55516.7 (July 8, 2378)

'There, do you see it?' Thirishar ch'Thane asked his guest excitedly. 'This gene sequence matches nothing in the entire Federation database.'

'It is in all four genders?' Talen asked.

'Yes, buried deep within the genome. It isn't an active gene, and I can't figure out what it would do if it was active.'

'Computer, display highlighted gene sequence as binary code and convert to Federation Standard,' Talen said. 'Thirishar, think about what you're looking at. If it doesn't do anything, then it might not be a gene.'

'Call me Shar. What are you thinking, that this is some kind of code?'

'Look at the translation,' he replied as the computer displayed a long sequence of numbers.

'They could mean anything, or be completely meaningless,' Shar muttered. 'This isn't my area of expertise.'

'We've been working for over a day. You asked for my help because you didn't know what you were looking at. I graduated from the Academy with a major in xenocryptography. Let me work.'

The young geneticist stepped back and with a flourish of his hands, indicated that Talen should take over. 'All yours, Lieutenant.'

'Computer, identify numerical sequences likely to be latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates of major cultural landmarks on Andor.'

'Requested function will require seven hours to complete.'

'We have plenty of time,' Shar said. 'I'll work on some of the other projects I have.'

'Wait a moment. Computer, do any of the numbers correspond with the

coordinates of Tower Hill?'

'Working, stand by.'

'Do you really expect it to be that easy?'

'Some things are.'

'The numbers 02-19-16 and 48-51-55 correspond to the location Tower Hill on Andor.'

Shar was astounded. 'It was in our genetic code all the time.'

'There are three more sets of coordinates,' Talen said and instructed the computer to locate their places on Andor. 'We're sure to find something there, but I don't know what.'

'It depends what the locations are, but you've done a fantastic job here. Ch'Thane to th'Dolus.'

'Yes, *Lieutenant?*'

'Lieutenant ch'Maras has found something. This is a lot bigger than I expected, Captain. I would like to speak with the Chancellor at her earliest convenience.'

'I will arrange it, but you should know that I have already spoken with her about allowing an away team on Tower Hill.'

'I take it the news was not good?'

'No, it wasn't. Unless you can convince her of the import of your discovery, I do not believe you will be able to complete this project.'

'How long before we reach Andor?'

'Another five days. You have plenty of time to perfect your argument, th'Dolus out.'

'Perfect my argument, wonderful,' Shar muttered.

'I'll research the history of the landmarks and see if I can come up with

something concrete to help you.'

'Thanks.'

Talen set himself up at the main station in the science laboratory where they had been working and gathered all the information he could about Tower Hill. He was familiar with the landmark as it was the primary funeral site for his people as well as location of the ancient and mythical Breaking, where Uzaveh the Infinite had told Thirishar he was not “Whole” and split him into four, thereby creating the four Andorian genders. The problem was that due to the genetic differences between the four genders, all were needed to create a child, and prior to the ch'Thane Genome Project, fewer children were being born because of bad bondings and the mortality rate was high. Now that he had found four locations on Andor which had been hidden in the genetic code, he believed he would find a way to make Thirishar “Whole” again—without destroying the four genders which had been part of Andorian life since the Breaking.

Tower Hill was the oldest monument on Andor, an ice fortress the equivalent of Mount Seleya on Vulcan, and home to Uzaveh the Infinite and the Throne of Life. He barely remembered the old Tale of the Breaking and looked up the Liturgy of the Temple of Uzaveh; Third Century Codex.

“Instead,” decreed Uzaveh, “from one, there shall be four.

“To one shall be given wisdom to be a protector—the cunning warrior who shall fight for the future.

“To another shall be given strength, providing a foundation upon which the others can build.

“One shall be given blood, the river of life that shall flow among the others, providing nurture and sustenance when the flesh longs to yield.

“And to the last shall be given passion, for the flame of desire will bring change to the others and warm them when the chill is bitterest.”

...

For Thirizaz, the Fire Daemon fed the soul-consuming passion. Loving Shanchen became a vessel for the Water Spirit, forever bound to the Eternal love flowing

from Uzaveh's Throne. For strong Zheusal, Earth became protector. For wise Charaleas, the Stars became guides, their light defying darkest night.

"When you are Whole, as I am Whole," Uzaveh said, "then shall you return to my presence and assume your place at my side."

'Shar, I think I understand it now.'

'What?'

'Each of the four genders is guarded by one of the four forces of nature: fire, water, earth and the stars. There is only one place where all have been One, Tower Hill. If we can find the Gates, and the Path of Light, we'll find the Throne of Secrets, where the Greatest Among Mortals was to sit beside Uzaveh the Infinite.'

'And you believe this is more than myth?'

'I believe that the four locations are where we can find the embodiment of the forces of nature, which we need for the Throne of Secrets.'

Shar shook his head. 'If I give this to the Chancellor, I'll be the laughing stock. I need something that isn't mystical.'

Talen sighed. 'Tell her that the four locations hidden in our genome are the key to finding the answer to the reproduction crisis. Hopefully, the debt she owes you for the Genome Project will be enough to get you permission.'

'Or?'

'Or we'll have to do it ourselves.'

'And breaking every law we have?'

'If need be. The very survival of our people may depend on it.'

Chapter Four

USS *Laikan*

In Andor orbit

Stardate 55524.7 (July 11, 2378)

Talen and Shar wore their standard uniform even though it was the middle of winter on the surface. Both men had refused to don the awkward winter clothing that would hamper their efforts, though the engineers on the team were in full winter regalia. The security personnel had likewise refused the winter clothing, needing to have the full range of movement. Talen was actually surprised to learn that the Chancellor had given Shar the go ahead to find whatever they hoped to find without any fuss whatsoever. Shar later confided in him that she was hoping to get re-elected and if they were successful, she would be.

'Th'Dolus to transporter room one, are you ready to beam down?'

Shar tapped his combadge. 'Yes sir, we're in position.'

'Good luck, we'll keep a lock on you at all time, th'Dolus out.'

'Ready, Talen?'

'Ready.'

Shar turned to the transporter operator. 'Energise.'

A harsh blizzard buffeted them as soon as the materialisation sequence and Talen had to use his tricorder to find his way to the exact location given to them by the genome. When Shar, the two engineers and two security officers had joined him, Talen pointed to a spot two metres ahead of him.

'This is it, this is the spot, but I'm not picking up anything on the tricorder,' he yelled above the wind.

Shar signalled for the two security officers to aim their phaser rifles at the spot. 'Set phasers to light stun and fire for five seconds. Talen, keep monitoring the tricorder.'

Talen nodded and the officers fired. There was no change and Shar signalled for them to do it again. After another five times, Talen called a halt. 'There's

something there, but it isn't natural.'

'Man made?' Shar called out as the wind started to die down.

'Definitely, but the construction materials match nothing we have on the planet.'

'Try the Federation database,' Shar suggested.

Talen patched the tricorder into the ship's library and ran the search again. 'Still nothing. What I'm detecting is a large crystalline structure, constructed in a pyramid formation, almost five hundred metres high. We'll need the ship's phasers to melt the surrounding ice.'

Shar looked shocked for a moment. 'That would destroy half the hill.'

'But we could uncover the original structure that stood here. It would be the most important archaeological find in our history.'

Shar tapped his combadge. 'Captain, we've found something down here and we need to use the ship's phasers. Lowest setting.'

'Where?' th'Dolus asked.

'This point. We need to be at least a kilometre away though.'

'*What have you found?*'

'Prepare to beam us up, Captain. I do not want to discuss this on an open comm channel.'

'*Stand by.*'

One minute and six seconds later they were back on board and the captain was there to greet them.

'Captain, I believe we've found the original structure from the Tale of the Breaking. It's a large crystalline pyramid almost five hundred metres high.'

'It sounds like it will destroy Tower Hill.'

Talen sighed. 'It will, but it may give us much more. The original structure our

people used hundreds or thousands of years ago, maybe even the Temple of Uzaveh the Infinite.'

'Thirishar, the Chancellor gave you full access. Do you want to risk it?'

'Yes sir,' he replied, glancing at Talen. 'It could be an amazing archaeological find.'

'Very well, join me on the bridge and we'll see what we can do.'

'Aye sir.'

Ten minutes later they were all seated on the bridge, and the viewscreen was focussed on the area they'd already excavated.

'Shar, this is your show,' the captain told him.

'Tactical, wide-beam, minimum-setting. Fire for thirty seconds.'

Everybody watched as the ship's mighty phasers ploughed through the atmosphere and then melted the ice surrounding the tip of the crystalline pyramid. More of the immense structure became visible after only a few seconds and by the time the full thirty seconds had elapsed, more than half of it had been uncovered.

'Continue firing, ten second bursts on each face of the pyramid,' Shar said. 'We should be able to get a sensor reading now.'

'It isn't diamond, nor any other carbon- or silicon-based chain. We've discovered a new element for the periodic table,' the tactical officer said as he continued to fire.

'I'd love to get a look down there,' Talen muttered.

'You and everybody else,' Shar added. 'Captain, permission to take an away team.'

'Denied,' th'Dolus replied.

The tactical officer stopped firing and looked at his board. 'Sir, we're being hailed by the Chancellor.'

'Wonderful, on screen.'

'What in Thirizaz' name are you doing, Captain?'

'Madame Chancellor, forgive me, but if you would look at the sensor images we have just taken, you will see what we have found buried beneath Tower Hill.'

'By Uzaveh,' she murmured. *'Is that the Temple?'*

'It may be, Madame Chancellor. We were going to send an away team down there to investigate.'

'Keep your people where they are, Captain. I will have a full team of archaeologists on site in a matter of hours. You may proceed to the next site.'

'Madame Chancellor?' Shar stepped forward.

'I have you to thank for this?' she asked.

'Not this time, Madame Chancellor,' he answered, stepping aside and pointing to Talen. 'Shanitalen ch'Maras discovered the locations.'

'Step forward, Shanitalen. Today has gone down in the history books as the day we rediscovered our heritage, and you shall be thanked for that. For now, please complete the rest of your project so that we may know the full extent of what we have lost.'

Talen bowed deeply. 'Thank you, Madame Chancellor. I will not let you down.'

The channel closed without a reply and the captain sighed. 'Well done, boys. You just got her re-elected without her having to campaign one iota. Where to next?'

Talen took another look at the immense structure now clear for all to see. 'Therin Park is the next site.'

'Helm, adjust course and put us in orbit over Therin Park, thrusters only.'

Chapter Five

USS Gibraltar

Approaching the Delphic Expanse

Stardate 55591.3 (August 4, 2378)

Captain Leza Astar stepped out from the ready room at the rear of the bridge to take her seat at the centre of the *Constitution*-class starship's bridge. She had brought along no personal effects to decorate it with since at the end of this mission she would be returning to her own vessel, the repaired and refitted *Pytheas*. As it was, the lower decks crew which had joined her on this assignment were not Starfleet officers in the strictest sense. They were from the Border Service, seen for years as the bastard child of the fleet; but in her estimation they were merely fellow officers and she treated them as such, much to their surprise. Astar was glad to have them along as they had all seen battle, both during and after—and in many cases, prior to—the Dominion war.

'Captain, we're approaching the cartographic border of the Expanse, Starfleet sector,' Weston said. 'There are no active listening posts or communication buoys.'

'There won't be, Lieutenant. The Skagarans may be members of the Federation, but this part of the Expanse is entirely their domain,' Logan replied from a corner of the bridge.

'Gonzales, keep your eyes open, it wouldn't surprise me if we were attacked by the Skagarans or the Xindi.'

'Aye sir.'

'Lieutenant Commander Epstein,' she turned to the first officer recommended to her by Admiral Bateson of the Seventh Border Service Squadron, to whom the *Gibraltar* would be turned over at the conclusion of the assignment.

'Sir?'

'What do you know of the Xindi?'

'Everything in the library, Captain. I did a dissertation on them at the Academy. It was published.'

She nodded. 'Is that why Admiral Bateson recommended that you serve as my executive officer?'

'No, sir. He wants to know whether I am suitable to take the executive officer billet on the USS *Banshee* when she has finished undergoing a major refit.'

'Well, when we get to *Star Station Echo*, I'll let him know how you've done,' Astar said, 'though I can see no major problems.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Now, what can we expect from the Xindi?'

'That would depend on who you meet. The Marsupials and Primates, and to some degree, the Aquatics, will be more favoured to you. The Reptilians and Insectoids are still angry at the actions of Captain Archer for destroying the Superweapon and stopping the Sphere Builders.'

'They'll have to get over it. They'll attack but the others won't?'

'Yes sir.'

'And the Skagarans?'

'If they detect Xindi on board, they will attack, regardless of the fact that we're all in the Federation. I understand that the issue of the Skagarans' continued membership is centred on our mission?'

'One of several points which will be addressed shortly. How long until we reach New Xindus?'

'At warp six it will take us another two weeks, Captain,' Weston said.

'I do not recommend exceeding that, sir,' Epstein added. 'Although the anomalies created by the Spheres have gone, subspace is very weak in the Expanse as a result and the area is littered with various rips and tears.'

'Noted,' Astar replied. 'Weston, slow to warp six.'

'Aye sir, warp six.'

Astar looked around the bridge, noted no junior officers and activated a

control on the side of her chair that sealed the bridge. Logan nodded and Epstein saw the action but said nothing. Only a raised eyebrow of surprise gave away his knowledge. Astar filed it away for future reference. 'All of you know should know that our official orders are to make peace with the Xindi after the debacle which forced the signing of the North Star Accords, and recommend whether the Skagarans' actions are appropriate given their status as members of the Federation. Additionally, we are to make sure that the North Star colony is faring well after all these years without official contact and try to correct any issues which may have arisen.'

'Sir,' Gonzales interrupted, 'we're receiving a hail from New Xindus. It's being relayed through a number of Xindi communication satellites.'

'Put it through.'

A Xindi-Primate face appeared on the main viewscreen. *'Federation vessel. You are hereby given notice to vacate the Expanse at once, or your vessel will be impounded and your crew enslaved under the edicts of the Xindi Empire.'*

Astar bristled. 'This is in direct violation of the North Star Accords signed by the New Xindi Republic. We are here to return three Xindi citizens who have been removed from their positions as Starfleet officers.'

'You may do with them as you wish, they are exiles and have no standing in Imperial society.'

Astar glanced at Epstein who was as surprised as she was. 'I would like to request an audience with the Emperor to formally dissolve any diplomatic relations which may exist.'

'I will relay your request through the proper channels. The North Star colony is now a vassal world of the Empire but your Federation embassy still stands. You may wait there until you receive word. New Xindus out.'

'Lieutenant, set a course for North Star, maximum warp.'

'Aye sir, North Star, warp nine.'

'Our job may be easier than we first thought,' Gonzales said.

'Something's very wrong,' Epstein corrected. 'I saw no evidence in any Starfleet dealings with the Xindi that they have ever had an imperialistic bent.'

It doesn't materialise overnight and I would say that someone or something has corrupted the Republic.'

'We are in the right universe, aren't we?' Weston asked.

Gonzales scowled. 'Captain, what do we do now? Were you serious about the dissolving of diplomatic relations?'

Astar sighed. 'Not in the least, Commander. I merely needed a good reason to get an audience with the Emperor. Since it would be politically astute for him to agree, I believe I will be granted that audience and then we'll know who or what is behind this bizarre turn of events.'

'I can think of a good one,' Parker added, having been silent until now. 'Andraprani could have created the Xindi Empire with a few words here and there. I would say that the Reptilians and Insectoids are the primary movers. You'd think after the Sphere Builders, they'd be more weary of powerful beings coming to them with sweet words.'

'You'd think,' Gonzales agreed.

Logan said nothing, merely observed the proceedings.

Chapter Six

Therin Park

Laibok, Andor

Stardate 55592.9 (August 5, 2378)

The Chancellor had reluctantly granted Shar full access to the planet's construction industry in order to uncover the other three sites, and after three solid weeks of de-construction, Therin Park looked like a building site. The Andorian Imperial Guard were standing watch and keeping tourists away from the area as fifty metres below the park itself was the top of another crystalline pyramid. Archaeologists had been crawling over the Tower Hill pyramid and confirmed that it was the Temple of Uzaveh the Infinite. The Therin Park temple was a third smaller and the landscapers were expanding the dig site to completely uncover the pyramid.

Shar confided to Talen that he didn't want to wait that long. It would take weeks or months to completely uncover the temple in the middle of the capital city. Shar looked at the captain standing beside him. 'Sir, do you think that we'd be able to use the transporters to get inside?'

'Can tricorders scan past the exterior?'

'Yes sir.'

'Then the transporters should be able to find a beam in point. Do you know what to expect?'

'The archaeologists exploring the Temple of Uzaveh have been mapping everything as they go along and I would expect this temple, though smaller, to be similar in design. Talen and I will go in alone to see if we can find what was hidden in the genome.'

'I assume you have permission?'

'The Chancellor granted me full access to the other temples now that she knows what I'm looking for.'

'You told her?' th'Dolus was surprised.

Shar shot a dark look at his companion, standing a few metres away. 'Talen ignored me and told her everything. She didn't think it was likely we'd find

anything more than the temple but thought it was interesting.'

'I see. Talen doesn't care about the glory like you do, Shar. He just wants to solve the genetic crisis.'

'As do I, Captain, but I have a reputation to uphold.'

'And the fact that the Chancellor is looking for a new chief scientific advisor hasn't entered into it? Believe me, Talen will be going back to his ship when he's done here. He hasn't entered an application to her office.'

Shar smiled. 'Excellent.'

'I notice you haven't either.'

'I want to see what the temples turn up.'

'The Director of the Institute of Archaeology has, maybe you should get it in now.'

'Good idea,' Shar muttered. 'Can you arrange for the transporter coordinates, sir?'

'Of course.'

Shar ran off and Talen walked over. 'Has he gone to put in his application?'

Th'Dolus smiled. 'How did you know that little trick would work.'

'I know glory hunters like him. He craves the recognition. The Chancellor would be assured re-election if she were to appoint him as her science advisor, considering his practical knowledge of genetics, history and archaeology.'

'Why are you here, Talen?' th'Dolus asked.

'I believe that the answer to the crisis lies in our DNA, and if the temples yield the answer, then I can find a mate, and not three.'

'You don't want a Sheltreth?'

'The Genome Project hasn't been able to find anything for me yet, because of

my Aenar heritage. I'm too Aenar for the Andorians, and too Andorian for the Aenar.'

'And if the crisis is solved, you won't have that worry.'

'Exactly, sir.'

'A commendable plan, Lieutenant.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'I'll be back shortly,' th'Dolus said and stepped away as he tapped his combadge.

Talen turned back to the work on the site as more antigrav trucks moved away carrying tons of soil from the park. The top of the temple had been uncovered the day before and the diggers moving the topsoil away before using industrial phasers to vaporise the lower levels of soil to uncover more of the temple. At current estimates, it would be another month before the temple was completely uncovered. Talen had two more sites to uncover and four artefacts to find before leaving Andor and heading back to his ship.

Shar returned a little while later and the captain joined them again. 'The transporter coordinates are set,' he told them. 'The sensors were able to find you a cavern at the base of the pyramid, some kind of large open space. There should be plenty of room but I don't know what you're going to find. The team at Tower Hill found nothing at their coordinates.'

'Thank you, Captain,' Shar replied. 'You ready, Talen?'

Talen held up his tricorder, torch, phaser and satchel with a number of containers. 'Ready.'

Shar tapped his combadge. 'Shar to *Laikan*, two to transport into the temple.'

'*Stand by, Thirishar*,' the transporter operator replied.

A moment later they materialised in the open room at the base of the pyramid, three hundred and sixty metres below Therin Park. Talen switched on his torch and then took a step forward as the light played on the crystalline surface. A barely audible hum filled the air around them and the crystal lit up from within, negating the need for torches.

'There was no report from Tower Hill about this,' Shar muttered as the light level neared daylight.

'According to the quantum dating, this structure is about two centuries newer than the Tower Hill temple, but still several thousand years old. It was built later, and probably has a few improvements in the design,' Talen said.

'Are you detecting any traps?'

'Nothing at the moment, but we should be careful.'

'I'd like to know what happened to the knowledge about building with these crystals,' Shar said, approaching what appeared to be the central point.

'Shar, what are those crystals for?' Talen asked, scanning one of a number of crystals in some kind of tray with the tricorder. 'They've got liquid crystal inside, possibly some kind of information storage?'

'They look like they slot into here,' Shar pointed to an opening of a crystalline growth in the centre.

'Put one in there.'

Shar hesitated for a few seconds and then picked one up, slotting into the opening. A blinding light filled the room and a holographic figure appeared in front of them. It was clearly Andorian, and looked muscular. He wore the traditional dress of ancient times, complete with shield and sword.

'It's Thirishar,' Talen whispered.

Chapter Seven

Ancient Temple

Under Therin Park, Andor

Stardate 55593.0 (August 5, 2378)

'I am Thirishar, Guardian of the Temples of Uzaveh. Are you worthy to enter the Temple of Zheusal, second of the heirs to the Throne of Secrets?'

Talen stood in shock as Shar stepped forward. 'I am Thirishar ch'Thane. I wish an audience with Zheusal.'

The Guardian looked down. **'You are not Zhen. Only bonded Zhens may enter the Temple of Zheusal,'** he told them before he disappeared.

Shar turned to face Talen. 'I'm outside the Sheltreth window. You're not. I'll get the project working hard on your bond. Only when the bond is ready can the four of you enter the temples, probably at the same time. This is going to take longer than I thought.'

'I'm glad I took an extended leave,' Talen replied. 'This could take a while.'

Shar nodded. 'Where's the next site?'

'The Khyzhon Sea,' Talen answered. 'The temple—most likely Shanchen's—is probably an island or even underwater.'

'Why Shanchen's?'

'Because she had the water spirit to guide her, as Zheusal had the earth to protect her.'

Shar nodded. 'We should leave everything here. Shar to Laikan.'

'Go ahead,' Commander zh'Share replied.

'We're ready to go to the next site, the Khyzhon sea.'

'Captain th'Dolus is currently meeting with the Chancellor. When he's done we'll go. Prepare for transport.'

Zh'Share was waiting for them in the transporter room.

'Can the Captain not meet us there?' Talen asked once he finished materialising.

'Is there a problem, sir?' Shar asked.

'Yes, there is. A group of people broke into the Tower Hill temple a few moments ago and stole a number of artefacts. The Imperial Guardsmen were killed and the entrance damaged. We may have to call in reinforcements to keep looters out.'

'Damn, we should have foreseen this,' Shar muttered.

'Are the crystals safe?' Talen asked.

'They are for now, until the entrance is uncovered,' Shar said, and at zh'Share's sharp look, he explained what they found. 'I think Charaleas' Temple is at Tower Hill, the uppermost part which is the best place to see the stars. Thirizaz' Temple is in the Northern Wastes somewhere, near one of the largest volcanoes.'

'Incoming transport, sir,' the operator said and th'Dolus materialised.

'Sir?' zh'Share asked.

'The Imperial Reserves are being called up and the temple sites are being cordoned off. Authorised personnel only, which includes the four of us, the Chancellor and the commanding officers of the local Guardsmen.'

Shar filled the captain in on what they had found and what needed to happen before anything would be solved. He nodded and gestured for them to join him on the bridge. On the walk, he explained to them that unless they were able to produce results, the Chancellor would hand the project to someone else.

'She'll probably hand it off to th'Toraz. The man has a singular talent for getting results, by ignoring protocol and getting people killed. I doubt that she'll like his methods, and it will sour her re-election campaign.'

'Then find something, quickly,' the captain said.

'We still have two more sites to find and investigate,' Talen replied. 'And I need a Sheltreth before we can all enter the Temples.'

'If you're right,' zh'Share muttered.

'He is,' Shar said as they reached the bridge.

'Helm, take us to the Khyzhon sea. Shar, feed the helm your coordinates. The sooner we get this done, the better.'

'Aye sir.'

It took a few minutes for the ship to change position but as they did so, Shar and Talen bombarded the small ocean with the primary sensors, looking for the crystalline pyramid which would mark the location of Shanchen's temple.

'Bring up the exact coordinates on the viewscreen,' Talen said. 'Scan down to the seabed.'

'Nothing there.'

'It must be buried in the crust itself, increase sensor strength, penetrate the crust.'

A few seconds later, Shar gasped. 'There it is, buried in the crust, only the very tip is above. Is it intact? Can it have survived the rising sea levels.'

'According to the sensors, the dimensions are the same as Zheusal's temple.'

'We need to get down there and see if it is one piece. I can't tell from up here, the sensors are being blocked by something'

'No transporters then.'

'No, we'll have to take a shuttle down there.'

'Gentlemen, it will several days to outfit one of our shuttles for aquatic operations. Is there nothing you can tell me from up here?' th'Dolus asked.

'No sir,' Shar answered. 'If you will let me speak to the Chancellor, I will explain the situation in full and I'm sure she'll allow us the time we need.'

Th'Dolus sighed. 'Come with me. Zh'Share, get engineering to work on one of the shuttles.'

'Aye sir.'

Talen leaned back as the viewscreen image was enhanced to see the tip of the temple. He wondered what technology was used to build such an immense structure and whether it would be possible to recreate it. Downloading his tricorder's data into the main computer, he looked again at the elements which made up the crystal structure. His initial theory was incorrect, and a closer look elicited a gasp of surprise, which no one on the bridge heard. The elemental structure of the crystal was comprised of carbon and another, unknown, element. Theoretically, this unknown element could revolutionise synthesis and if bonded with dilithium, could even make synthetic dilithium as potent as the naturally-occurring substance.

Talen turned back to the viewscreen as Shar the captain emerged from the ready room. 'What did the Chancellor say?'

'The election is three months away. We have that long to provide concrete proof to her that we can do something about the genetic crisis, or she hands it to somebody else.'

'How soon can the shuttle be ready, Captain?' Talen asked.

Zh'Share answered. 'If the engineers work around the clock, it can be ready in eighteen hours, twenty-two at the most.'

'Then all we can do is wait,' Talen muttered.

Chapter Eight

USS Gibraltar

The Delphic Expanse

Stardate 55629.7 (August 18, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales stood at the tactical console behind the captain's chair and marvelled at the fact that this old ship was still in service. The ship had been through more refits and repairs than any other vessel of its class and could still outperform some of the newer vessels Starfleet was churning out in the wake of the Dominion War. According to the latest communiques from Command, the Corps of Engineers were subtly defying the President's standing orders and building plenty of new ships, far more than were strictly needed to patrol the Federation's borders.

Gonzales sighed and hoped that the recently-released knowledge of the Cha'lav, the Amon and the small number of vessels that seemed to be entered the Alpha and Beta Quadrants from the Delta Quadrant would convince Satie that Starfleet needed a more powerful presence. Not only to show the second- and third-tier powers that they were still a force to contend with, but to show any newcomers that Starfleet was not toothless, no matter how much they had been through. It was the main reason that she had prepared the exhaustive report on the Cha'lav for the Heads of Starfleet Tactical and Starfleet Intelligence, not to mention the Commander-in-Chief as well. Her ruminations were interrupted by an alert from her console.

'Captain, we're approaching the North Star system and I'm detecting two Xindi vessels on an intercept course. One Skagaran vessel is moving to intercept.'

Astar sighed and stood up. 'Open hailing frequencies. I want to speak to all of them.'

'Channel open.'

'This is Captain Leza Astar of the Federation starship Gibraltar. We have been granted access to the Federation Embassy on North Star by an envoy of the Xindi Empire. To the Skagaran vessel, as a representative of the the Federation, I order you to stand down immediately. To the Xindi vessels, if you attack I will consider it an act of hostility and respond accordingly. Astar out.'

'An interesting gambit,' Epstein said.

'You disapprove?'

He shrugged. 'Not entirely, but I don't think such a threat will endear you to the Xindi and make them listen to you.'

She looked him square in the eye and said simply, 'it wasn't a threat.'

'Sir?'

'North Star is a human colony ceded to the Skagarans when they joined the Federation. The Xindi have annexed it. I'm not of a disposition to kowtow to them. If they attack, we'll respond.'

Epstein nodded and whispered his reply. 'I object to your behaviour in this matter, Captain, and will note it in my log.'

She nodded and turned to Weston. 'Helm, bring us into a standard orbit of North Star.'

'Captain, I tend to agree with your exec,' Logan whispered into her ear.

She turned to her unwanted chaperon. 'That is as it may be, but you're an observer and have no standing in this mission. Go file a report or something,' she replied and turned to her tactical officer. 'Gonzales, contact the Federation Embassy. I want to know who and what we're dealing with down there.'

'Aye sir,' the tactical officer replied. 'I have Ambassador Francis MacReady on the channel.'

'Put her through.'

A red-haired woman appeared on the screen, wearing clothing that almost certainly came from what Gonzales would call the Old West on Earth. It appeared that even over the last two hundred years, these people had not evolved much past what Captain Archer had reported, at least in terms of clothing.

'Ambassador, can you tell me what is happening down there?'

'Not on an open channel, Captain. Feel free to bring a shuttle down and we'll talk.'

'We've got transporter technology. It will be faster.'

MacReady shook her head. *'There's a transport shield over the capital, Captain. The Xindi don't trust us or the Skags.'*

Astar nodded. 'I will bring my first officer and chief of security, is that acceptable?'

'It is, please land at these exact coordinates. I can't promise a safe landing anywhere else.'

'Acknowledged, Ambassador. We'll join you shortly.'

The channel closed and Epstein headed for the turbolift, tapping his combadge as he did so. 'Lieutenant Parker, meet me in the main shuttlebay.'

'On my way.'

'Gonzales, you have the bridge. We're taking the *Heyerdahl*. See if you can find where that transport shield is coming from. We may need to take it down.'

'Yes ma'am. I'm already scanning for it.'

Astar smiled. 'Excellent. I'll contact you as soon as we land,' she added as she entered the turbolift. 'Captain Logan, are you coming?'

'I'll remain on board if you don't mind, Captain Astar.'

'What is she planning?' Weston asked.

'That depends on what she learns,' Gonzales answered. 'But don't be surprised if we end up in a fire fight because the Xindi don't see things her way.'

Weston sighed. 'Why can't I be on a ship that explores the galaxy and doesn't get shot at every five minutes?'

'Because then you'd be bored, sir,' Ensign Paul Venn, the operations officer chimed in with a grin on his young face.

Weston snorted. 'Yeah, but I'd be more likely to stay alive.'

Logan stared at Gonzales as she allowed the banter to continue. He made a note on his ever-present padd. She was not cut out for command, not even for short periods. Better she returned to Starfleet Tactical.

'Shuttlebay to bridge, we're ready to depart.'

'Acknowledged, Captain. Bay doors opening. Good luck.'

The bridge officers watched as the Heyerdahl left the ship and descended toward the atmosphere.

'I have a really bad feeling about this,' Weston said at the exact moment Gonzales lost contact with the shuttle.

'I wish you hadn't said that,' she replied and stabbed her console with an angry finger. *'Gibraltar to Heyerdahl. Come in, Captain.'*

Weston turned to face his own console again. 'I'm not picking them up on visual scanners. Where'd they go?'

'I have no idea,' Gonzales replied and tapped her station. 'Red alert, all hands to battle stations. All senior personnel report to your stations.'

'What's going on?' Xeris called from engineering.

'The Captain's shuttle disappeared,' Gonzales replied as the turbolift doors opened and replacement bridge personnel emerged.

'By the Elements, what now?' Xeris cursed as Gonzales took the command chair, leaving the tactical station to her replacement.

'I wish I knew,' the tactical officer and acting captain answered, stealing a glance at a stoic-visaged Logan.

Chapter Nine

Shuttlecraft *Heyerdahl*

North Star colony

Stardate 55629.8 (August 18, 2378)

Lieutenant K'Tyra Parker was thrown from the pilot's seat the moment the shuttle entered the atmosphere. By the time she reached the controls again, the shuttle was in free fall, hurtling toward the surface at a speed which would instantly kill the three of them. A quick glance told her that both Astar and Epstein were unconscious on the deck, but she couldn't help them until they were safely on the ground. She tried to angle the shuttle back toward the upper atmosphere but found she couldn't. The main computer was offline so she grabbed a tricorder from under the console and looked at the readouts. There was an energy field enveloping the upper atmosphere, and they were caught in some kind of tractor beam which was pulling them down to the surface. Fortunately, she located the source of the beam and fired the shuttle's phasers, neutralising it with a surgical strike, and most likely killing whoever was manning the device. Parker grabbed the console as the shuttle's momentum carried it on the wind and it took her several precious seconds to regain control.

'Ambassador MacReady, this is Lieutenant Parker of the Gibraltar, please come in.'

'Is there a problem, Lieutenant?'

'Yes ma'am. The captain and first officer have been injured, and an energy field is preventing us from returning to the ship. There is also an energy field around the city, preventing me from landing the shuttle at your coordinates. I need an alternative landing site.'

'I'm sorry, Lieutenant. The only other safe landing point is the spaceport outside the capital. It will be along walk to the Embassy and not a very safe one.'

'What happened? Where did that energy field come from?' Parker as she angled the *Heyerdahl* toward the spaceport.

'The energy field is a Xindi weapon designed to protect the planet from orbital bombardment. I don't know why they activated it. I'll speak with the Xindi Governor in a moment.'

'Thank you, Ambassador; Parker out.'

Parker didn't believe a word of it and was sure that there would be a contingent of armed Xindi waiting for them the moment they stepped out the shuttle. Now that she was sure she wasn't going to be fired at, she activated the autopilot and went to check on the others, medkit in hand. A brief scan confirmed that both Astar and Epstein were fine, with no concussion or other injury. They had both been knocked unconscious by the activation of the energy field. Parker administered each of them a dose of inaprovaline, an all-purpose stimulant/curative.

'What happened?' Astar asked as she woke, and Parker filled her in as Epstein came to. 'You think she's lying?'

'I think she's involved in what happened, yes. She seemed far too calm about it. And I'm pretty sure the Xindi governor was in the room as well. Just a gut feeling though.'

Astar sat down and held her head for a moment. 'How long before we land?'

'About two minutes, then we have a walk into town if there aren't Xindi soldiers waiting for us.'

'There will be,' Epstein said. 'It appears that we've stumbled into one of their frequent internecine squabbles. The Xindi races are always trying to outdo one another and everyone else gets caught in the crossfire.'

Astar looked at him. 'Not this time. Whatever happens, no one is going to get caught in the crossfire. At this moment in time I would be quite happy to get every human being off the planet, kick the Skagarans out the Federation, and leave the Expanse to the Xindi.'

'Can we get everyone off the surface?'

'The *Gibraltar* was outfitted as an emergence evacuation ship during its last refit. It can hold 2000 comfortably.'

'There were six thousand people when Captain Archer visited two hundred years ago, wouldn't there be more now?'

'There would be, had the Xindi not annexed the planet. I'm guessing about a third were killed.'

'That still leaves 4-5000 depending on population growth. A lot more than we can handle.'

'The Skagarans will help. They are Federation members.'

'They don't act like it.'

'So we'll teach them, or my recommendation to the President will be to remove them.'

Epstein nodded and Parker could see that he didn't like Astar's musings. 'I thought you Starfleet types always tried diplomacy first?'

Astar sighed. 'It might not look like it, Commander. But I've had first hand knowledge of Xindi behaviour. I know how they think and act. Diplomacy rarely works. They like evidence and action and I intend to show them that the Federation doesn't take kindly to their planets being annexed. The Skagarans should have notified us of this when it happened, or before if they knew it was going to. It doesn't look good for them at the moment.'

'We're landing,' Parker said. 'And there are eleven armed Xindi waiting for us. I hate being right.'

'What do we do?' Epstein asked.

'You tell me, Commander.'

'We can't fight, not without being attacked first.'

'We were,' Parker muttered.

'You don't know that, Lieutenant. You're speculating. We can't run, not with that energy field in place.'

'So?'

'We allow ourselves to be taken prisoner. Find out what is happening and attempt escape.'

'Brilliant logic,' Parker said sarcastically.

'He's right, Lieutenant. Once we're inside, we'll be able to tell who we can trust and who we can't. Who's involved and who isn't. In the meantime, Gonzales will be hammering the ears of anyone who'll listen about blasting the energy field into particles and rescuing us.'

'A sound plan,' the security chief replied. 'But I don't see it working,' she added as the shuttle touched down.

Astar stepped out the shuttle into hot sunshine covering the spaceport in a shimmering haze. Epstein followed, passing his commanding officer a phaser, and then Parker, who aimed her phaser rifle at the Xindi.

'Lieutenant?'

'I won't make it easy for them. They've probably been told to take us alive. I'll do the same. It's set to stun.'

She sighed. 'Fine.'

A Xindi-Reptilian stepped up to them. *'Drop your weapons and come with us.'*

'And you are?'

'Giving you an order!'

'Lieutenant, I think you may have been right about their motives,' Astar said and raised her phaser. 'Step back or I will fire.'

Chapter Ten

Spaceport

North Star colony

Stardate 55629.9 (August 18, 2378)

The Xindi soldiers raised their own rifles in return.

'This will get us nowhere. You will not be harmed,' the Reptilian said.

'Why don't I believe you?'

Before he could answer, a skimmer pulled up beside them and Ambassador MacReady stepped out, pushed at phaser-point by a Xindi-Insectoid. 'I'm sorry, Captain,' she said.

'So am I,' Astar replied and fired at the Reptilian soldier.

She ducked and rolled as Epstein and Parker fired their own weapons before moving. Three soldiers, including the Reptilian in charge, fell to the ground and MacReady used the distraction to her advantage, freeing herself from the Insectoid with a backward kick to its leg. She grabbed the rifle it held and fired. The Insectoid dropped to the ground as three more Reptilians did, felled by Astar and the others. The remaining five decided to up the ante and changed their rifles to a kill setting.

'Set to kill,' Astar ordered as she did the same and fired.

Parker and Epstein followed suit, taking out another soldier each and MacReady took out another. The remaining soldier valiantly avoided two shots before getting two in the chest. As soon as Astar was sure there would be no more firing, she stood up, dusted herself off and turned to the ambassador.

'What the hell was that about?'

Parker took the rifle from the ambassador as Epstein walked up to them. 'I don't like being shot at,' the acting first officer added.

'The Xindi annexed North Star over twenty years ago. We fought back as best we could but they had superior numbers.'

'What about the Skagarans?'

MacReady's face became pained. 'The single vessel in orbit is one of five remaining Skagaran ships, Captain. They were the strongest opponents of the Xindi assault once the Empire made itself known. The Skagaran homeworld is nothing but a volcanic wasteland. It was destroyed by a similar weapon that your Captain Archer destroyed two hundred years ago.'

'They built another Superweapon?' Epstein asked.

'It's the Empire's greatest weapon. Any planet that resists too hard is blasted to dust.'

Epstein turned to Astar. 'I think that settles it, Captain.'

She nodded. 'How many people still live on North Star?'

'Two and a half thousand,' she replied as a tear meandered its way down her cheek.

Astar tugged her uniform tunic down. 'Where does that energy field originate?'

'The garrison in the capital, why?'

'We're going to take it down, and get these people back to Federation space.'

'North Star is our home.'

'Not if the Xindi Empire has anything to say about it,' Parker retorted sourly.

MacReady's face brightened. 'Maybe you could speak to the Emperor. He might listen to you.'

'Really?' Epstein wasn't convinced.

'The Empire was formed twenty-three years ago when an alien ship crashed on New Xindus. The survivors were powerful creatures who looked similar to the Xindi and they killed the Xindi Council. The Republic fell within a year and the aliens still control the Empire. If you could speak to them...'

Parker stepped forward. 'You said the aliens looked similar to the Xindi.'

How?'

'They were reptilian in appearance, some insectoids and a few primates. Why do you ask?'

'Cha'lav!' Parker practically spat the word.

'Cha'lav?' MacReady asked.

'Long story,' Astar replied.

'We have time. You can tell me as we ride back to the Embassy.'

'Captain,' Parker said, 'I'm invoking Code Black status for the remainder of this mission.'

'Lieutenant, there's no evidence that Andraprani was even here.'

'Did you read the full terms of the order?'

'No. What I did read was enough.'

'Wait here,' she replied and ran to the shuttle, returning a moment later with a padd. 'Read section five.'

Astar did so and sighed, passing the padd to Epstein, who nodded and handed it back to Parker.

'What's going on?' MacReady asked.

'I'm in charge of this mission now,' Parker replied and explained the situation as they climbed into the skimmer.

By the time they reached the Embassy gates, MacReady was fully versed on the Cha'lav threat and what it meant for the galaxy if the aliens were to succeed. 'Can we stop them?'

'The Captain's plan is our best option. We'll leave you here while we go to New Xindus, take out the Cha'lav leadership, and then let the Xindi get on with their lives. We'll return here and with the remaining Skagaran ships, we'll evacuate everyone back to Federation space.'

'Most people won't want to leave.'

'Then we'll stun them and beam them up. This region, even with the Xindi back in charge, is not stable enough for the few of you that are left to survive on your own. Right now, Starfleet can't even afford to spare a single ship on regular supply and patrol runs to make sure that you're all alive, let alone safe. In my opinion the best thing to do is get you out of here. Captain, do you agree?'

'Unfortunately, I do. I'm aware that you may not like to be relocated, but it is the safest option. Somewhere close to the core worlds and you'll be well-protected.'

'How many Xindi are in the garrison, and which species?'

'It's controlled by the Reptilians, with Insectoid and Reptilian guards, Primate servants and Aquatic engineers. Probably fifty all told.'

'Any human or Skagaran slaves?'

'Not that I know of.'

'I'd like to do this without killing any of them, Lieutenant.'

'So would I, sir, but knowing the Xindi the way you do, is that a likely scenario?'

'No, it isn't.'

'Then our only option is to take the whole garrison out.'

'What will you do about the Xindi civilians?'

'If they stay out of the way, nothing. They're free to live here. But we need to get back to our ship. Does the Embassy have any Federation Marines stationed there?'

'No, only Skagaran Marines and North Star Militiamen.'

'They'll have to do. When does night fall?'

'In about three hours.'

'I want to be ready to go in five hours. We'll need all the explosives you have. Can you contact our ship at all?'

'No, the shield prevents all communication signals from getting through, but we do have sensors to tell us what is going on outside.'

'We might be able to use that to send a message. Hopefully, Gonzales will understand it.'

Chapter Eleven

USS Gibraltar

North Star orbit

Stardate 55630.1 (August 18, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales did not deign to react to the Xindi General's threats. The Skagaran vessel was cowering behind a moon and the *Gibraltar* was being flanked by the two Xindi ships. She'd had just about enough of not being able to do anything while half the ship's senior officers were out of contact or dead. It was time to do something and the Xindi could like it or lump, she really wasn't bothered which since the General had been hurling insults at her for the last two hours.

'Weston, take the ship for a low pass over the atmosphere.'

'Sir?'

'We're not going to try and go through the energy field, not yet, but I want to get a reaction from the Xindi.'

'They're going to shoot at us.'

'I sure as hell hope so. This ship was given a tactical upgrade for the mission to put an end to the Maquis and it is in fighting form. We're going to give the Xindi a bloody nose and hope they back off.'

'And if they don't?'

'We kick them in the balls.'

'Yes sir,' Weston said.

'Belay that, Lieutenant. Commander Gonzales, that is unacceptable behaviour.'

'You heard me, Weston,' she replied, ignoring him.

The *Gibraltar* dived toward the upper atmosphere, making a low pass and almost grazing the energy field. As expected, the Xindi took exception and fired a warning shot—which rebounded off the energy field and crackled against the Starfleet ship's shields.

'Whoops,' Weston muttered sarcastically.

'Tactical, fire phasers, continual fire until I give the order to stop. Aim for their weapons emplacements.'

'Yes ma'am.'

A phaser barrage pounded the lead Xindi ship's shields into oblivion before slamming into the disruptor arrays and torpedo launchers.

'Nice shooting,' Gonzales said as the lead ship backed off, its companion moving to intercept the *Gibraltar*. 'They won't fall for the same trick twice.'

'They're up to something, ma'am,' the beta-shift tactical officer replied. 'The lead ship is launching something.'

'And the other ship is between us and them, preventing a sensor lock. Nice tactics, but we have a few tricks of our own. Target the second Xindi ship with a couple of photon torpedoes, just enough to nudge them out the way.'

'No need,' Weston replied. 'Whatever they launched is coming this way.'

Gonzales threw herself into the command chair and slammed her palm against the comm in the armrest. 'Xeris, I need every joule to the shields you can give me.'

'*What's happening?*'

'The Xindi have a manned probe like the one they used on Earth in the twenty-second century.'

'*By the Elements,*' he cursed. '*You'll have it.*'

'It's rotating into position to fire at us.'

'Photon torpedoes, fire!'

Seven photons sped from the *Gibraltar* to impact on the weapon, but its shields only wavered fractionally.

'That worked well,' Weston muttered.

'They're firing!'

The beam slammed into the *Gibraltar*'s shields and sent the ship spinning out of orbit. Weston managed to get the ship back under control within a few seconds, but the damage was done. The weapon disappeared and a moment later debris from the Skagaran ship floated in low orbit around the moon they had hidden behind. The Xindi weapon returned to its previous position and aimed its beam at the *Gibraltar* again.

'Not this time,' Gonzales said through clenched teeth. 'Quantum torpedoes, full spread, maximum yield. Blow that thing out of orbit.'

The tactical officer didn't reply as she fired. The four quantum torpedoes shredded the weapon's shields like a tree in an ion storm and then vaporised the weapon itself.

'The Xindi ships are retreating, preparing to go to warp.'

'Let them go.'

'They'll be back with more ships,' Weston added.

'I know, but until they do we have an opportunity to rescue the Captain and the others, if we can get that energy field down.'

'Ma'am, I'm picking up a faint signal from the orbital sensors. They're surging at regular intervals.'

'Analyse the pattern and run it against all known ciphers, ancient and modern.'

'Yes ma'am.' Gonzales waited impatiently for several minutes as the young tactical officer did her job. 'It's Morse code. Just a few words, beginning with the Captain's authorisation code. "Four hours...energy field down..."'

'At least we have a time frame and we know they're alive,' Gonzales said and looked at the expanding debris field from the Skagarans. 'They must have known about the weapon. No wonder they tried to hide.'

'Ma'am, I think you might want to look at this.'

'What is it?' Gonzales said as she approached the tactical station.

'I'm using the ship's primitive astrometrics lab to get the layout of the Expanse, and I'm only detecting a few Skagaran vessels.'

'How many?'

'Four now, the one just destroyed was their fifth vessel.'

'What? They should have over fifty. What the hell is happening around here?'

'I don't know, ma'am.'

'Take a shuttle and see if you can find their computer core. Hopefully enough of it will be intact that we can figure something out. Maybe the Captain has learned something helpful.'

'We'll find out when she gets back,' Weston replied grimly. 'I don't like the way things are turning out in this backwater.'

'Lieutenant, pipe down. On this ship things always seem to go to hell,' Gonzales told the bridge officers. 'All we can do is wait, and hope that we have four hours.'

'Aye sir.'

Gonzales leaned back in the chair and sighed. When she joined Starfleet, all she wanted to do was protect everybody else, which is why she'd joined security and worked her way up to chief of security. She didn't want to be a tactical officer, nor did she want to be on the command track. At least she hadn't until recently. With a homicidal first officer and Astar off the ship or incapacitated so often over the last few months, she had had more than her fair share of time in the big chair, and she'd gotten to like it.

Perhaps when all this was over, she'd talk to the captain about a transfer to command. Logan had left the bridge at some point during the attack, no doubt to write her up for insubordination.

Chapter Twelve

Federation Embassy

North Star colony

Stardate 55630.5 (August 19, 2378)

Lieutenant Parker looked at the Skagarans and North Star Militiamen and inwardly sighed. They would be about as useful as a handheld phaser against a shielded starship. Astar and MacReady were discussing the finer points of gunboat diplomacy while she was dividing the people she had at her disposal into workable units since she now knew their strengths and weaknesses after four hours of drills. There would be three Militiamen and two Skagarans, plus one Starfleet officer in each group. Though the Embassy had been staffed with almost entirely North Star natives, there was ninety year old Starfleet security officer who had remained behind to teach the Militiamen, and raise a family. She would lead the third team. Parker would lead the first team, and Astar the second.

'Are you ready to deploy?' Astar asked as she walked over.

'They're as ready as they'll ever be,' Parker answered noncommittally. 'There are two entrances to the barracks, front and rear, but there's also the possibility of a rooftop entry. I want Lieutenant Jenson's team to take the roof, you to take the rear and I'll take the front.'

Astar nodded. 'You want as many diversions as possible.'

Parker grinned. 'Since the Militiamen are with us, Ambassador MacReady will call on the Xindi for a couple of fake incidents in town, which the townsfolk are willing to take part in, even knowing the risks. They want the Xindi gone.'

Astar scowled. 'This isn't a civilian operation.'

'If the Xindi decide to use that weapon of theirs on the surface, they won't be any civilians.'

The captain sighed. 'Fine, let's go.'

'Alpha team, with me.'

'Beta team, this way.'

'Gamma team, follow my lead,' Jenson broke ranks with the others and took command of his quintet. 'We have a little trick to drop the roof on their heads. That will be your signal,' he told Astar and Parker.

'You have to be ready as soon as MacReady signals the Xindi to assist her.'

'We will be.'

'All right, we'll split up here and go in separate directions. Whichever route you take, you have fifteen minutes to reach the barracks, dismissed.'

The people exited the Embassy, headed in several different directions, and formed into their teams some distance away so as not to arouse suspicions should any Xindi be watching. Parker and her team quickly double-timed it to the barracks, and were in position with six minutes to spare. They checked their phaser rifles and waited for Ambassador MacReady's signal.

It wasn't long in coming.

Fires broke out in the town square as the revellers from a number of parties "clashed". With the Militiamen nowhere to be found, MacReady had no option but to call on the Xindi soldiers. They started to flood out the front exit only to be cut down by her team. Astar had reluctantly agreed that all weapons should set to kill as the Xindi would have their weapons on the same setting and they didn't want any surprises.

Seconds later, there was a crash inside and a few screams as the roof did indeed collapse. More phaser fire was heard from the rear as Astar's team moved in and within three minutes, the barracks was clear. The Xindi were either dead or being held in their own brig. Astar, Parker and Jenson met outside the energy field control room.

'I lost three,' Jenson said sadly. 'They were good men.'

'Two,' Astar replied, making no further comment.

Two as well,' Parker replied and ask Jenson, 'do you know how to shut down the energy field?'

Jenson held up a satchel with a grin. 'Got all the "tools" I need right here.'

Astar shook her head. 'Set the explosives and let's go.'

Two minutes later there was a tremendous shaped explosion which caved in the energy field control room without touching the barracks themselves. Astar tapped her combadge only to find that it didn't work. She turned to Parker. 'Lieutenant?'

'The electromagnetic shockwave could have knocked them out.'

'There's a communications system back at the Embassy,' Jenson said. 'But we might have company. There are a number of civilian Xindi living on North Star, but even civilians are taught in military schools. The state is the only employer. Sound familiar?'

As they walked back to the Embassy, Astar filled Jenson in on the last sixty years of Starfleet history. He was shocked but able to put that aside when they reached the Embassy gates to find a horde of angry Xindi.

'What the hell is going on here?' Jenson stepped forward and used his parade ground voice.

'What's going on?' A Xindi-Marsupial mocked. 'You just destroyed the only thing that's keeping us safe from the Empire.'

'What?' Astar asked.

The Xindi ignored her, keeping her eyes on Jenson. 'That energy field is the only deterrent against the Empire's Superweapon. You just blew it to pieces and we're now defenceless.'

Ambassador MacReady emerged from the main building of the Embassy compound. 'Who do you think installed it? They have the codes to disable it at a whim, and whatever defence you thought you had was an illusion. These people destroyed one of the small weapons in orbit earlier today with no loss of life. They can get everyone off this world and take us somewhere else.'

'The Empire will still get us!' another Xindi called out.

Astar stepped to Jenson's side. 'The Empire is led by aliens who wish to destabilise the political arena and set everyone against one another so they can enslave us all as they have done in other galaxies. We've stopped them before and we will stop them again. I can't promise that the Empire's leaders won't try to destroy this world because of what we are about to do, but we

will do our best to rescue you before that happens. It is your choice whether you come with us and live to fight another day, or die here as the Superweapon destroys your planet.'

While the crowd digested that information, a Starfleet shuttle descended through the cloud cover to land just a few metres away from the Embassy. Lieutenant Weston stepped out followed by a small contingent of security officers, all carrying phaser rifles.

Chapter Thirteen

Federation Embassy

North Star colony

Stardate 55630.6 (August 19, 2378)

'Is there a problem, Captain?' Weston asked.

The Xindi looked angry but made no further comments or hostile moves. 'Have you recovered the *Heyerdahl*?'

'An engineering team is picking it up now. The atmosphere is still ionised so we decided it was best not to beam you up.'

'Good choice,' she smiled and then turned to MacReady. 'Ambassador, I'd like you to get what these people know about the Xindi and keep it in a secure location. We're going to New Xindus to deal with the problem and then we'll swing by and pick everyone up.'

'We're not leaving!' the Xindi woman replied.

Astar looked at her. 'If the Xindi want the Delphic Expanse they can have it. We're taking the humans and Skagarans. You can enjoy life without them.'

'But...they do my cleaning and my cooking. I pay them good money, for servants anyway.'

Astar bristled. 'Then you'll have to learn to cook or starve to death.'

'Ready, Captain?' Weston asked as the Xindi looked ready to fight.

'More than ever,' she replied.

Six phaser rifles were pointed at the Xindi crowd to cover the Starfleet evacuation. As the shuttle lifted into the air and joined its companion as it neared the atmosphere, Astar leaned back and sighed.

'Sir, we had a little trouble while you were on the surface. The lead Xindi ship launched a probe like the one that hit Earth two hundred years ago.'

'I know, we saw it on sensors from the Embassy. The Skagarans are almost all dead because of a genocidal campaign by the Xindi.'

'The Cha'lav,' Parker corrected.

Weston looked at her. 'Are they involved?'

'They lead the New Xindi Empire,' Parker told him. 'They've wiped out the Skagarans, annexed hundreds of planets in the Expanse and are now using this region to stage their attack, using the Xindi as cannon fodder.'

'We should do something about that.'

Astar interrupted. 'We're going to give the Xindi help in getting rid of the Cha'lav. If that fails, we'll destroy the Council Chamber and every Cha'lav inside.'

'Captain, that's not the right thing to do,' Weston countered.

'We cannot, will not, let the Cha'lav get a foothold in this galaxy. If they do, it will be over because they'll bring in thousands of ships to stop the Federation and anyone who joins us, and commit genocide on the rest. Unlike the Dominion, the war won't be stopped by one man.'

'Odo was just the lynch pin, Captain,' Parker told her. 'Damar's resistance, the Prophets preventing the Dominion from pouring through the wormhole, the Federation alliance; all these helped to drive the Dominion back, allowing us to hold them there. Even if Odo hadn't gone back to the Great Link, the alliance could have held them indefinitely.'

'No, we couldn't,' Weston disagreed. 'With nothing to do but blockade Cardassian territory, the alliance would have crumbled and the Jem'Hadar would have taken advantage of that. Without Odo the war would have dragged on for months or even years and the stalemate would have eventually broken. I did my senior year dissertation on that very fact.'

Parker scowled.

'He graduated second in his class, Lieutenant. He knows what he's talking about,' Astar interjected. 'We should learn from our mistakes. We need to start gathering exceptional intelligence from our allies and enemies so we know whether the Cha'lav are testing them as well. The more we know the better prepared we'll be.'

'Captain, once this assignment is over, what are our orders?'

'Lieutenant, you can explain the situation.'

'I was sent back in time to prevent the Cha'lav from gaining a foothold in the past. We were losing in the future and it was a last-ditch attempt to save our entire galaxy. But an Andorian friend of mine betrayed us and jumped back earlier. She has been assisting the Cha'lav in getting a foothold in unclaimed space. We stopped the Cha'lav in the Kursican sector and they are now somewhere in the Delta Quadrant. The *Pytheas*' official mission is to find the Cha'lav and stop them. My mission is a code black on the Andorian.'

'What's a code black?'

'Terminate with extreme prejudice,' Astar answered sourly, 'although this particular one has a neat little addendum. Any Cha'lav hostiles we come across during our mission are to be interrogated or eliminated, regardless of the Prime Directive implications.'

'It supersedes the Prime Directive? Who issued that order?'

'It came from the Starfleet Commander-in-Chief who received the order in writing from President Satie. The Cha'lav represent the greatest threat this galaxy has ever known.'

'And I thought the Borg were bad.'

'I've seen worse,' Parker muttered cryptically.

'*Kon-Tiki to Gibraltar, request permission to dock.*'

'*Permission granted, Kon-Tiki. Captain, the Xindi Emperor requests an audience with us at our earliest convenience.*'

'He can wait until we're ready,' Astar replied. 'Is the *Heyerdahl* aboard yet?'

'*Just now, Captain.*'

'As soon as we dock, you can break orbit and set a leisurely course to New Xindus, warp five.'

'*Aye sir, Gonzales out.*'

'Is it wise to keep him waiting?' Weston asked.

'I don't care. I'm not in the mood to kowtow to a genocidal maniac. My mission in the Expanse is to find out what's been happening. However, I'm not in command of the mission anymore.'

'What?'

'I am,' Parker said. 'Condition of the code black. Our new orders are to stop the Cha'lav using whatever means are necessary, even if it means blowing the capital city to hell. Though I would prefer that no one is killed except the Cha'lav.'

'How are you going to do that?'

'Threaten to kill them all if they don't leave.'

'And if they don't?'

'Kill them one by one.'

Weston scowled. 'Doesn't that go against the Khitomer Accords' article on treatment of prisoners of war?'

'I don't like it any more than you do, Lieutenant. But as we've explained, even the Prime Directive is ignored on this. The Accords are so far down the list as to be meaningless,' Astar said sadly.

'We'll stop them, Captain, somehow.'

Chapter Fourteen

Shanchen's Temple

The Khyzhon Sea, Andor

Stardate 55635.5 (August 20, 2378)

Talen could not help but be impressed with the work done thus far. Over the last two weeks, a number of overlapping forcefields had been put in place to keep the seawater away from the site and the *Laikan* had used its transporters to remove as much of the seabed as possible. Enough of the temple had been uncovered for the transporter to get a permanent lock on any away team members, but as usual, the Chancellor had denied them permission to enter. Shar was pacing the bridge while Talen was fine tuning the search for the final temple.

'Shar, instead of pacing, why don't you contact the Project and see if they've found any compatible bondmates.'

'They found them yesterday, I was going to wait until they were all together before I told you,' the other Andorian replied absently as he continued pacing.

'I could kill you,' Talen hissed, angry energy pouring from his antennae.

Shar turned and saw his expression. 'Sorry, sometimes I just get wrapped up in my work.'

Talen shook his head in exasperation. 'I've been working with you on this project for weeks, and you still think you're the only one here.'

Commander zh'Share walked up to them. 'Will you two give it a rest. The Captain is trying to get you access to the temple but you're not making it easy for him.'

Talen sighed. 'Tell the Captain that I have a Sheltreth and once we have bonded the four will enter the temples together.'

'Unnecessary,' Captain th'Dolus told them as he emerged from his ready room. 'All you need to do is go into Uzaveh's Temple, the others are all linked, but they do need to be uncovered.'

'So it's time to go to the Northern Wastes?' Shar asked.

'Yes.'

'Captain, one of the forcefields is failing!' the operations officer said. 'The engineers are having trouble keeping it stable against the flow of the ocean.'

Shar cursed and flew to the bridge engineering station. 'Talen, can you help me. I need to strengthen the forcefields with the ship's power.'

'That'll only work in the short-term. We need to leave a portable generator on site.'

'Where are we going to get one of them from at this short notice?'

'One of the shuttles. The on-board computer will be able to keep the forcefields in line.'

'Captain?'

Th'Dolus nodded. 'Do it.'

'Remotely launching the shuttle now.'

'Two minutes to forcefield failure,' the operations officer called out.

'Shuttle will reach the site in one minute and eleven seconds,' Shar said as Talen guided the shuttle toward the surface.

'We'll be cutting it close,' Talen added as the shuttle passed through the upper atmosphere and into the cloud cover above the ocean.

'Forcefield failure in forty seconds,' Shar told him.

'Computer, link all the forcefields around the temple to the Shran's primary computer.'

'Acknowledged, link established.'

Talen turned to the captain. 'I've written a basic program to master the forcefields, but someone will need to monitor it periodically to make sure it doesn't fail. It will take three seconds to download once the shuttle is in place.'

'Fifteen seconds.'

'Shuttle in position in five...four...three...two...one...now, downloading program.'

'Well?' th'Dolus asked as he turned to the viewscreen to see the forcefield waver and flicker.

'Computer, activate program Talen-Temple-1, now!'

'Program initialised, forcefields holding.'

Shar clapped his hands briefly. 'Nicely done. How about we head to the Northern Wastes and get the last temple uncovered?'

'Not so fast,' zh'Share countered. 'We'll monitor the situation for a couple of hours and make sure all is well. I'm sure you can accept that, gentlemen? We wouldn't want all your hard work going to waste now, would we?'

Talen nodded. 'As you say, Commander.'

Th'Dolus narrowed his eyes at his exec but said nothing. 'You have your orders. Commander, you have the bridge.'

'Aye sir,' zh'Share replied, shooting her commanding officer a quizzical glance.

After both senior officers moved away, Talen turned to Shar. 'What was that about?'

'Zh'Share wants the *Laikan* but the Captain isn't retiring any time soon. I would say she has something up her sleeve which will grant her the promotion, one way or another.'

Talen shook his head. 'This isn't the Imperial Guard.'

'You'd be surprised,' the scientist muttered and then changed the subject. 'Your program seems to be working. How did you write it so fast?'

Talen shrugged. 'I wrote it last week. Figured we might need something like it sooner or later.'

Shar grinned. 'Let's say you and I go down to the surface for a while and have a little fun.'

'I have my bondmates to see first,' Talen reminded him.

The ship suddenly trembled and th'Dolus emerged from his ready room. 'What the hell was that?'

Shar looked at the science station. 'There's been a massive explosion just outside the capital and extensive power loss across the planet.'

'Where?'

'The primary power node from the ancient generator,' Shar said looking at the captain with a stricken expression. 'It's been destroyed.'

Talen paled. 'The entire planet will lose power.'

'There'll be mass panic and the Temples will be unprotected.'

'That's right, the Way of the One will finally take what is theirs!' Commander zh'Share replied and held a phaser on them. Half the bridge had phasers out and it was impossible to tell whose side they were on.

'Commander?' th'Dolus asked.

'Tactical, destroy the Temple.'

'You can't do that!' Shar yelled and rushed the woman.

She fired and vaporised him in mid air. 'Would anyone else care to try and stop me?'

'Why?' Talen asked. 'These are the greatest finds in our history.'

'And the last of the myth keeping us as four instead of One. Uzaveh will return when we are One and bring us all to salvation.'

Th'Dolus roared and everyone turned to look at the viewscreen as Shanchen's temple was destroyed by a photon torpedo. 'You will die for this, traitor!'

'I have people across the world who will do my bidding.' Zh'Share calmly looked at the helmsman. 'Take us to Therin Park.'

The helmsman stood up and produced a phaser of his own. 'Put down your weapon, Commander.'

Chapter Fifteen

Shanchen's Temple

The Khyzhon Sea, Andor

Stardate 55635.6 (August 20, 2378)

She fired a moment before he did and his shot went wild, stunning on the younger bridge officers. The helmsman was vaporised. 'I warned you. I don't care who does it, but someone better move this ship.'

'Computer, initiate self-destruct sequence, authorisation th'Dolus-Echo-2-3.'

'Unable to comply. Secondary command processors are offline.'

'Did you think I wouldn't figure that into my equations?' she smiled thinly and put on a mask of some kind. 'Computer, activate program zh'Share-1.'

Talen looked up as gas began to flood the bridge. 'Computer, initiate transport to shuttlecraft Shran.'

Zh'Share's angry visage was the last thing he saw as he dematerialised. He slipped into the pilot's chair and manoeuvred the shuttle away from the destroyed Temple. The *Laikan* fired at him but he pushed the shuttle to maximum thrusters and out of the ship's line of fire. He aimed the shuttle for Tower Hill. If he was lucky he would be able to convince the Guardian that he was worthy of access and find some way of stopping the religious fanatics from destroying everything that made his people what they were.

Even flying at thruster speeds, it only took him seventeen minutes to reach Tower Hill and Uzaveh's Temple. He opened the hatch before the shuttle was even on the ground and jumped out. As expected, the temple was completely unprotected. He walked inside and almost immediately Uzaveh's Guardian, the warrior Thirishar, appeared as the cavern brightened.

'Who dares destroy a Temple of Uzaveh?'

'I don't know if you can understand me, warrior Thirishar, but a religious group known as the Way of the One have destroyed the primary node of an ancient power generator that powers our planet, and they will destroy the other temples as well. I am Shanitalen ch'Maras of Andor and I request access to the Temple of Uzaveh to stop the scourge of evil.'

'You are one, Shanitalen, and cannot hope to stop them alone,' the Guardian replied.

'I am whole!' Talen retorted. 'My bondmates do not need to be here. Uzaveh, search my mind if you have that power and see what has become of us because of what you did. My people are dying but I can save them with your help. We were always whole but we needed to see it for ourselves.'

The Guardian disappeared and Uzaveh appeared in his place. **'You are still young, Shanitalen, but you see the truth and I believe your intentions are pure. I will protect my Temples from the evil that plagues my world if I have your promise that you will tell no one of what has transpired here today.'**

'I swear upon my own life that it shall remain secret.'

'You are whole once again,' He added and vanished.

The cavern dimmed and Talen walked out into the sunlight. It was almost anticlimactic but he had saved his people from the Way of the One. He reached the shuttle but found zh'Share standing by it holding a phaser rifle.

'What have you done, Lieutenant?'

'The Temples are protected from the likes of you,' Talen answered. 'I'm going to inform the Chancellor and Starfleet of your treachery. You'll face the firing squad for this.'

'The Federation won't allow it. Capital punishment is illegal, or have you forgotten?'

Talen stepped right up to her and the phaser rifle dug in to his chest. 'I will make you pay for what you've done.'

She fired but nothing happened. 'What trickery is this?'

'Your actions are not in the best interests of the Andorian people,' Talen replied. 'Give me the phaser rifle.'

'You won't kill me, you can't,' she stated but there was fear in her eyes.

'Commander Granapirto zh'Share, I'm arresting you on the charge of treason.'

The evidence is clear and you'll be court-martialled. I have no doubt you'll be found guilty and dishonourably discharged from Starfleet Command. Then it's up to you what you do. The Imperial Guard will have a warrant out for your arrest across the entire Federation and in allied space before the court-martial is over.'

Zh'Share sighed and handed over the phaser rifle. 'Now what?'

'Now we go to the Chancellor and you tell her what you've done.'

'The Way of the One will protect me,' she replied and smiled.

She began to convulse as she dropped to the ground and Talen knew there was nothing he could do, even if he had wanted to. Suicide was the best option for her. He left her body on the ground and entered the shuttle. It was already programmed for the Office of the Chancellor and he engaged the thrusters. As he flew over the capital city he saw not mass panic but orderly life and he wondered what was going on.

'Captain th'Dolus to Lieutenant Talen, could you please join me in the Chancellor's office as soon as possible.'

'I'm on my way, sir, Talen out.' Th'Dolus and the Chancellor were the only two people in the office when he was shown in ten minutes later. 'You called for me, sir?'

'What happened at Tower Hill?'

'I'm afraid I can't tell you, sir. I promised.'

The Chancellor smiled. 'No matter. I had a vision of Uzaveh a few minutes ago, and I believe the rest of the world did as well. We are whole again. The Way of the One have given up their arms and will be arrested. The power node has been restored and I believe that our troubles are over. Thanks to you, Lieutenant.'

'Thank you, Madame Chancellor. I have one thing to ask of you, if I may.'

'I think it is only fair.'

'Grant pardons to the Way of the One.'

'They're terrorists!' th'Dolus replied.

'No, they're believers in a different culture, one in which we have just been granted. We could learn from them about the way we used to be. We will probably need them in the coming months as the full scope of what has happened comes out.'

'You told me he was smart.'

'Yes ma'am,' the captain replied.

'Very well, I will grant them pardons. Captain, I expect a commendation to go into his personnel file regarding this.'

'It will, Madame Chancellor. I can assure you,' he replied. 'Talen, I think it's time you got your bond sorted out. Don't you?'

'Yes sir, if you'll excuse me, Madame Chancellor?'

'Go.'

Chapter Sixteen

USS Gibraltar

The Delphic Expanse

Stardate 55656.6 (August 28, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Isaac Epstein took a walk around the bridge before he lowered himself into the command chair. Captains Astar and Logan were arguing about the correct way to handle the situation and although Logan favoured the diplomatic approach, and Astar favoured gunboat diplomacy, it would be Parker who made the decision, an aspect of the mission that Logan strenuously disagreed with, even after reading the full code-black mission orders cut by Command. He was a pacifist but a life in Starfleet taught one that although violence was a last resort, it was necessary on occasion. He'd read reports of other Border Service ships and they seemed to get into phaser matches more often than not. It was not an ideal situation for him to be in but he did his duty, whether he liked the orders or not.

'Commander, we're approaching the New Xindus system. There are three warships flanking our position.'

'Don't worry, Lieutenant. They're our escorts. They want to make sure we're not going to kill the Emperor.'

Weston snorted. 'Like they'll be able to do anything.'

'We're not in the habit of creating regime changes in foreign empires, Lieutenant.'

'Sir, we've done that twice for the Klingon empire in the last fifteen years, accidental though it might have been, and at least twice for the Borg. Captain Kirk himself was responsible for doing so on several occasions.'

'That was a different era.'

'Aye sir,' Weston replied, clearly not convinced, but felt he wasn't going to be able to pursue the point at this juncture.

'Captain Astar to the bridge, we're approaching the New Xindus system.'

Astar emerged from the ready room at the bridge's rear, and looked at the viewscreen. 'I see we have some escorts. Gonzales, tactical assessment?'

Logan said nothing as he entered the bridge and took a seat at the mission ops station.

'The Xindi vessels have substantial firepower, definitely more than they did a few decades ago. It will be like fighting the Cha'lav again as the weaponry confirms what we believe. What I'm seeing is definitely Cha'lav-derived.'

Astar turned to face her. 'How will we fare ship to ship?'

'We'll come out on top. I've had Xeris' engineering crews make modifications to our weapons systems to give us an advantage over them, or rather to counter their advantage.'

The captain nodded and sat down in her chair. The Xindi-reptilian vessels were herding them to New Xindus and Astar thought it wise not make any antagonistic moves. She would be being antagonistic enough once she had an audience with the Emperor, whether he be Xindi or Cha'lav. She was sure the Cha'lav were behind this, and the weapons and various intelligence she had bore that out, but there was still the possibility that the Cha'lav had been and gone, leaving behind enough trouble to make this sector perfect for them when they decided to attack again.

'Captain, we're being hailed.'

'Put it through.'

'Federation vessel,' the same envoy as before spoke, 'you will be meeting with the Emperor at 1900 hours your time. I suggest you wear appropriate clothing.'

'Thank you, we'll be ready to beam down five minutes beforehand.'

'You will arrive by shuttle thirty minutes beforehand. Further details will be forthcoming at 1800 hours. New Xindus out.'

'Interesting,' Epstein said.

'How so, Commander?'

'Presuming the Cha'lav know who you are based your activities in the Kursican sector, you might think that the Emperor is being exceptionally accommodating.'

'You're saying he doesn't know?'

'It is a possibility,' Epstein conceded.

'Then this could be another advance fleet which zh'Malashan knows nothing about.'

'For an empire who have successfully conquered thousands of galaxies, they would have to have multiple methods of attack,' Logan said.

'They're overreaching themselves,' Gonzales countered. 'I was speaking with Parker earlier and she had been going through the Cha'lav database. She told me that reading between the lines, she was sure that the rebellion was doing far better than they wanted to let on and they were fighting fronts in several galaxies. In Parker's opinion, the Cha'lav Hegemony have reached maximum entropy and our galaxy is their last push to prove to the Cha'lav people and their vassal worlds that they still have teeth.'

'Then we started fighting back,' Astar replied, 'and scuppered their plans. So now they're just going to keep sending a few ships here and there to keep us on our toes.'

'A sound tactic,' Logan added. 'We'll be off balance if they decide to make an all out attack sooner rather than later and with numbers on their side, they'll win.'

'That's just it, they don't have numbers on their side,' Gonzales reminded him. 'If they did, then the Kursican sector would be under Cha'lav control. They had to pull significant ships off other duties in this galaxy to try and stop us. And they failed. That means that whatever they have planned in the Delta Quadrant needs reinforcements from home.'

'We know what they're planning,' Astar said sourly. 'We have known for some time, but we didn't put it together.'

'Sir?'

Astar sighed. 'Last year, a number of ships were detected entering the Alpha Quadrant from the Delta Quadrant and a small fleet was set to find out what was going on. Task Force Vanguard discovered that all the refugee ships had come from deep in the Delta Quadrant decades ago, some had been travelling

for centuries, and there were some in the taskforce who thought it might be the Borg. One or two ships said something was ravaging Borg space and taking out our greatest enemy. Admiral Janeway dealt the Borg a worse blow when she destroyed their transwarp hub, preventing them from escaping their own territory. When we interviewed people on various ships, we were told that what they left was a scene of utter devastation. The ships fled the destruction and are still coming, but we're putting them where we can.'

'Does Captain Picard know about the Borg?' Logan asked.

Astar turned to him. 'I'm afraid that information was classified by someone higher up.'

'I see,' Logan replied, thinking about what that might mean. 'What is the state of the Borg Collective now?'

'That I don't know, but I'm sure Command is planning on sending someone back out there once we can be sure they'll be able to come home.'

Chapter Seventeen

USS Gibraltar

In orbit of New Xindus

Stardate 55656.9 (August 28, 2378)

'The *Heyerdahl* is prepped and ready for launch, Captain,' Weston called out from the helm.

'Thank you, Lieutenant,' Astar replied as she fiddled with the white dress uniform. 'I hate this thing.'

'So does everyone else, sir,' Gonzales said as she pinched the jacket.

'It's not the worst dress uniform,' Logan added from the science officer's station. 'The older ones were worse. At least these look like a dress uniform and not a Vulcan robe.'

'Are we supposed to pin medals on these or what?'

'When Starfleet decided to release them, possibly,' Logan muttered. 'But you're up for a court-martial Captain. Not a medal.'

'Thank you for reminding me,' Astar countered through clenched teeth.

'And your actions and behaviour in the Expanse won't go over well either.'

Astar pulled away from Gonzales' ministrations. 'Captain Logan, I have had enough with the Federation Council overlooking things because it's not convenient. Admiral Janeway sent me into this stew so I can mend fences with the Xindi. If I can get rid of the Cha'lav and get the Xindi back to the way they were before, then I have to try.'

'If it is the Cha'lav,' Logan countered. 'And there's no way the Xindi will be able to go back to the way they were. The best we can do is hope that they are able to get past this unpleasantness.'

'My aim is to protect what is left of the Skagarans and bring the Xindi into the Federation, or at least keep them as allies rather than enemies.'

'They have never been our allies.'

'There's a first time for everything,' she said. 'If you'll excuse me, I have a bloodless coup to engineer.'

Logan opened his mouth to protest but a glance from Gonzales silenced him. Once she had gone, he turned to Weston. 'Who is she taking with her, Lieutenant?'

'It will just be her, Commander Epstein and Lieutenant Parker.'

'Oh boy.'

Gonzales planted herself in front of Logan. 'Unless you're going to help, get the hell off the bridge.'

'I'm an observer on this mission, and you're coming dangerously close to being insubordinate, Commander.'

'Captain Logan, if you're an observer, then observe. This crew's morale is low enough at the moment without your comments.'

Logan nodded. 'I understand that, Commander. But Captain Astar should not leave you in command of the ship. You're not ready.'

'I've been left in command several times,' Gonzales replied. 'The fact of the matter is, she took the most qualified people. Commander Epstein knows more about the Xindi than anyone else on board, and Lieutenant Parker knows more about the Cha'lav.'

Logan sighed. 'She seems to know what she's doing. I'll leave you to it,' he added and walked off the bridge.

Gonzales sat in the command chair. 'Before anyone thinks of making a comment about Captain Logan's attitude or behaviour, be aware that I shall note this conversation in the ship's official log and make a complaint against him myself when we return to Earth.'

'Heyerdahl to bridge, request permission to depart.'

'Permission granted, Heyerdahl, bridge out.'

'Now, we wait,' Talen said.

'Talen, scan for all ships in the area and get Malling down to stellar cartography. I want to know if anything can sneak up on us.'

'Sir, the *Gibraltar* is hardly a ship of the line,' Talen replied. 'Even with the upgrades she received last year, the ship still has a number of weaknesses.'

Gonzales grinned. 'Captain Sandhurst managed to keep this ship in one piece through thick and thin, I think we can do the same for one mission. But in order to do that, I need to have all my options open, and there's a good possibility that we're going to have a fight on our hands once the Captain does whatever she intends to do on the surface.'

'Aye sir,' Talen replied. 'All the ships in the area are of standard Xindi design, but the weaponry has been augmented by what appears to be Cha'lav technology. I can't be sure though.'

'Any Cha'lav ships in the area?'

'None that I can detect, but that doesn't mean one isn't hiding behind one of the many moons or planetoids in this system.'

'Continual scans, Lieutenant.'

'Aye sir.'

'Commander, incoming starship. Cha'lav design,' Weston said a few minutes later.

'On screen,' Gonzales ordered.

'Standard cruiser. Nothing we can't handle,' Talen said with a smirk.

'Red alert, all hands to battle stations. Someone keep Logan off the bridge.'

'Can we do that?' Weston asked.

'Not within regulations, no. We just have to hope he doesn't decide to observe.'

'Right,' Weston replied sarcastically.

'Open a channel.'

'Channel open.'

'This is Commander Gonzales of the Federation starship *Gibraltar*. This is sovereign Xindi territory, withdraw immediately.'

The screen came on and a familiar face appeared. *'This is Lord Ashal of the Cha'lav Hegemony. While you may have destroyed my flagship, you have not destroyed me, and I will return the favour, but only when your pathetic captain knows the truth. Where is she?'*

'Captain Astar is on her way to the surface to negotiate with the Emperor for all Starfleet withdrawals from the Expanse.'

Ashal chuckled. *'Ah yes, I do remember agreeing to that. As Emperor, I hereby deem negotiations concluded. Withdraw or be destroyed. This territory belongs to the Cha'lav. The Xindi are merely a means to an end and will be eliminated when they have served their purpose.'*

Gonzales took a deep breath and felt a hand on her shoulder.

'I am Captain Lionel Logan. On behalf of the Federation, I would like to issue the following statement,' he said. 'At no time in the past, present or future, has the Cha'lav ever held territory in this galaxy, and nor shall they. You are trespassing in sovereign territory and any actions you take against us will be considered an act of war, end transmission.'

Gonzales whirled round. 'What the hell was that about?'

Logan held up a hand and tapped his combadge. 'Did you get all that, Captain?'

'I did, Captain, and thank you. The Xindi leadership heard every word.'

'Sirs, I'm picking up a massive subspace disturbance approaching the system. It's the Xindi!'

'How many ships?'

'Sixty-three, and thirteen Skagaran ships.'

'What's going on?'

'The Xindi are now a Federation protectorate, Commander,' Astar said. 'The rogue factions who supported the Cha'lav have been routed and the government-in-exile has been restored to power. If Lord Ashal opens fire, take care of him.'

'My pleasure.'

Chapter Eighteen

USS *Gibraltar*

New Xindus

Stardate 55657.0 (August 28, 2378)

Captain Astar emerged from the turbolift just in time to see the Xindi fleet enter the system with the Skagaran ships a moment behind them. The combined fleet arrayed themselves around the planet, completely surrounding the Cha'lav cruiser.

'Open a channel to Lord Ashal.'

'Channel open, Captain,' Gonzales replied.

'Lord Ashal, your single cruiser is no match for the Xindi and Skagaran fleet. You have lost ships in both the Kursican sector and here in the Delphic Expanse, and I expect that the rogue Andorian currently leading the remainder of the Cha'lav fleet in the Delta Quadrant will shortly face yet another defeat. I would suggest retreat, in order to recover from your inflicted losses. My report to Starfleet Command and to our allies will be to destroy any Cha'lav vessel sighted anywhere in our territories. You have been warned. End transmission.'

Commander Epstein clapped his hands and the rest of the bridge crew followed suit. 'Congratulations, Captain. The look on his face was priceless.'

'Do you think he'll listen?' Gonzales asked as the viewscreen showed the cruiser vanish into a spatial rift.

'He's probably gone to warn zh'Malashan,' Parker said. 'Captain, since our mission in the Expanse is over, can we get back home? The *Pytheas* should be ready by now and we have some crew members to replace, and a killer to catch.'

'By all means,' Astar replied. 'Lieutenant Weston, set a course for *Star Station Echo*. It's time we dropped the *Gibraltar* back to her home base.'

'Aye sir, course laid in.'

'Take us home, full impulse until we leave the system and then warp six.'

As the *Constitution*-class starship left orbit and went to full impulse, the Xindi starships entered orbit, all but one. Gonzales watched as it rushed ahead of them and jumped to warp while still in the system.

'Sir, where was that ship going?'

'I have no idea, Commander, but it's none of our business.'

'Aye sir, we're receiving an incoming message from Andor. Lieutenant Talen is asking for us to pick him up on the way home.'

Astar smiled. 'Tell him we're still a ways out yet and we might be delayed, suggest he continue his extended leave.'

'Yes sir, sending now.'

'Captain, might I have a word with you in private?' Logan asked.

'Commander Epstein, you have the bridge,' Astar answered and beckoned her fellow captain into her ready room at the rear of the bridge.

'I'd like you to put Lieutenant Commander Gonzales on report.'

'On what grounds?'

'Insubordination, reckless behaviour, conduct unbecoming, you name it.'

'All of which are court-martial offences, and you have more seniority than I have, why don't you put her on report?' Astar asked in return.

Logan sighed. 'I'm an observer on this mission, Captain. I have no standing to put her on report.'

Astar leaned back. 'Why don't you explain that to me?'

'As soon as we got back to Earth and I was debriefed by Admiral Ranar, I was court-martialled for losing the starbase, much as any Captain is for losing a ship. It was deemed by the board that I didn't do enough to protect the starbase and the Kursican sector and I was found guilty of not protecting the people under my command. I've been officially stripped of rank, Captain. I'm not even a member of Starfleet anymore. Admiral Janeway asked that the sentence not be carried out until after this mission.'

'So what will you do when we get home?'

'I'll go back to my apartment, find my family and try and start afresh. I have plenty of time on my hands.'

Astar nodded. 'Submit your report and I'll make a determination as to whether Gonzales goes on report. Tell me what you think of Epstein.'

Surprised by the sudden change in direction, it took Logan a moment to catch up. 'I think he's a competent officer and quite frankly he should be in the regular fleet rather than the Border Service.'

'They need good officers as much as we do, Captain. Perhaps more so considering the areas of space they patrol.'

Logan nodded. 'If you'll excuse me, Captain. I'd like to make a start on finding my family.'

Astar smiled and waved her hand. No sooner had Logan left than the chime sounded. 'Come.'

'Captain,' Epstein entered. 'Could I speak with you on an urgent matter?'

'Go on.'

'I've been thinking about whether I want to stay in the Border Service, and I was hoping you could give me some advice.'

'Such as?'

'It is worth me transferring to the regular service, or should I take up the post of first officer on the *Banshee* when she's repaired?'

'What do you want to do?'

'I want to command my own ship some day, but I don't know whether I would be best served by doing so in the Border Service or the regular fleet.'

'You're an executive officer now, Isaac. One step away from commanding a ship of your own. There's no guarantee that you'd be afforded a lateral move into the regular fleet. It depends what spots are open, and while we need a lot

of good officers, the Border Service needs them too. What's going to happen if all the officers in the Border Service decide to go into the regular fleet?'

Epstein saw where the conversation was heading. 'The Border Service would be nothing more than a collection of mothballed ships and the Federation's borders will become completely lawless.'

'I wasn't going to put it quite like that, but that is one possible outcome, extreme as it may be. The question you have to ask yourself is whether you want the billet on the *Banshee*?'

Epstein looked down for a long moment. 'Thank you, Captain. You've given me a lot to think about.'

'Not a problem. If it helps any, I've put a commendation in your file for your service to the Xindi and a recommendation that your suitability for the executive officer's billet on the *Banshee* is very high.'

'Thank you, Captain. That means a lot to me.'

Epilogue

USS Gibraltar

Star Station Echo

Stardate 55694.6 (September 11, 2378)

Captain Leza Astar looked up from her desk as the door chimed, and she granted entry, knowing it could be only one person. Admiral Morgan Bateson stepped into the ready room and planted himself in the chair opposite her before she could get up. He waved his hand to prevent her doing so and got straight to the point.

'Epstein is a good fit for the second chair?'

'He's a good fit for the first chair,' Astar replied as she put down the padd she was reading. 'He's a steady man with a good head and a good heart. He knows more than enough to take on the big chair and given the right situation he'll do fine.'

Bateson nodded. 'I thought so as well, but he'll be taking the exec's position on the *Banshee* for now. We'll see what happens in a few years. Onto the less palatable subjects now. The *Banshee* and several other ships will be going to the Kursican sector in about two to three weeks, with the *Pytheas* as escort. I have already assigned someone to take command of *Star Station Kilo*, as *Starbase 535* has been redesignated. We had to almost completely gut the thing, but at least it's up to Starfleet specs now.'

'The Cha'lav did a number on it, and the ejection of the fusion core did not help matters at all,' Astar agreed.

'As you know, Captain Logan has already had his court-martial and he was found negligent. He elected to resign his commission rather than face dismissal, and Starfleet Command allowed him to do so. I have two guards posted outside waiting to take you into custody, Captain, for your own court-martial, which will be held on Earth in one week. The *Pytheas* will continue to be prepared for its mission to the Delta Quadrant and your new first officer will be taking the helm while your fate is decided.'

'Do I know him?' Astar interrupted.

Bateson scowled. 'I don't know who it is yet, nor do I know his or her gender, or species, and I will thank you not to interrupt me, Captain.'

'Apologies, Admiral.'

'Accepted. Once you get to Earth, Lieutenant Commander Gonzales will take temporary command until your new exec arrives. The *Sawyer* will be taking you all to Earth and it leaves in almost two hours, I expect you'll be ready by then?'

Astar nodded and touched her thumb print to the padd beside her. 'I have just finished my last report. I'm packed and ready to go.'

Bateson sighed. 'I tried to get them to hold the court-martial here, but apparently you have made a couple of enemies at Headquarters over the last six months and they want to see you hanged. Be careful.'

'Thank you, sir. I appreciate what you've done for me.'

'I'd like to ask you one question if I may, why couldn't you have kept the *Rock* in one piece for me? This ship has had so many patch-ups and refits it's a wonder it hasn't fallen apart.'

'Engineers are a marvel.'

'Some of them at any rate,' Bateson replied, thinking of one who wasn't quite so good. 'I hope you manage to beat this, Captain. We need more people like you out there, especially at this time.'

'Yes sir,' Astar replied, not sure what else to say.

'I'll let you get yourself sorted. The guards outside will escort you to the *Sawyer* and you'll be confined to quarters for the six-day trip to Earth. Your belongings have already been transferred aboard.'

'Sir, what class of ship is the *Sawyer*? I've never heard of the ship before.'

Bateson grinned. '*Asimov*-class, a new class of scout ship designed to be fast and manoeuvrable. The Border Service has commissioned a few from Starfleet Command for reconnaissance and search-and-rescue. but they are also perfect for transporting a small group of people quickly over long distances.'

Astar was then left alone with her thoughts and decided not to put off the

inevitable any longer. The guards escorted her to the small but spacious quarters aboard the starship, and it wasn't long before the ship left *Star Station Echo* behind and jumped to warp, heading for Earth and her very unpleasant court-martial. She had been reading a book when the door chimed.

'Come.'

The door opened and Gonzales, Xeris, Weston, Malling and Parker entered. They all took seats and looked at each other before they glanced at Astar.

'What?' the captain asked.

'We've all been called to stand as witnesses against you,' Parker said. 'Admiral Ranar has recused himself from the situation but you're still facing a harsh trio.'

'Who?'

'Admirals Sitak, Coburn and Janeway.'

'Let me guess, Sitak's the chair?'

Xeris nodded. 'She'll be a hard sell.'

'I have the truth on my side,' Astar replied. 'And I know I can trust you not to make me look too bad. Where's Arlon?'

The others looked at each other again. 'He declined to see you, sir. Said it was unethical.'

Astar sighed. She knew the young Bolian too well to accept his comment at face value. He thought that she was going to be found guilty and did not want to give her negative vibes since it went against his personal moral code and the Hippocratic Oath he had taken to do no harm. It was something he had always taken far too seriously, but she was unable to do anything about it since she could not leave her quarters.

'I don't suppose one of you would be willing to try and convince him to see me?'

'We have all tried,' Xeris said. 'He is a coward.'

'That's unfair, Commander,' Astar countered. 'He has his beliefs and we should respect that.'

'It is my belief that he is a coward,' the Romulan muttered.

Gonzales shot him a look but he did not back down. 'I'll talk to him again,' the Betazoid promised.

'Thank you. If you don't mind, I'd like to get some rest. I'm not really up to visitors today.'

End

*The Pytheas will return in...***Secrets and Lies**