

Star Trek: Pytheas Extreme Prejudice, Part 2

By Brother Benny

Chapter One

Prime Headquarters

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55267.2 (April 8, 2378)

Minister Dolan slammed his fist against the table when he realised what had happened. He could now hear the distant rumbles across the government sector of the city and hoped that the leader of the people was safe. This hope was short lived however, when his senior aide rushed in with terror in his face.

'The Tower has been hit with explosives, Minister!'

Dolan closed his eyes. 'The security people are seeing to the rebels?'

'Yes, Minister.'

'Good, then we can get on with our jobs. I want every able-bodied person with medical training on the streets now. There will be a lot of wounded.'

'I'll see to it right away, Minister.'

Dolan sighed as Jonek ran from the room. The young man was excitable but he was the only one who seemed capable of running the Science Ministry's administration. Others had tried and failed, but Jonek took everything in his stride. The communit beeped for his attention and he glanced at the screen for just a moment. It was a simple text message but the single line spoke volumes.

Code Titian. Please enter authorisation code.

He did as he was bade and waited for the response. Code Titian was the last-ditch attempt to keep a running government. It had been exacted only once before, after the great ground-quake two centuries ago that swallowed the city's previous location on the coast. This new city was built further inland and away from a major fault line. The code meant that the majority of the Central Council were dead or incapacitated and no one in the senior government was alive to continue. It also meant that First Prime Gexin was dead and that if no one else in the remaining government was senior to him, then he would be named Regent until the elections took place approximately one year from now. The communit beeped again and his worst fears were confirmed.

'Minister? Are you alright?' Jonek asked, bringing in two emergency medkits.

'I'm afraid we won't be joining the people on the street. We have more important work to do.'

'What could be more important?'

'Code Titian has been initiated and I have been named Regent,' Dolan replied slowly, still unable to believe that he had just become the de facto leader of the Ynelavii people.

'What do you want me to do...Regent?'

Dolan glanced at his aide. 'Find as many ministers as you can and bring them here. We need to reconstruct the government as soon as possible. Furan should still be in the building, get him first.'

'Of course, Regent.'

Dolan activated the communit and sent a message on the secure government net calling all ministers to his office immediately. The Code Titian alert would have informed them that he had been named Regent and provided that they still favoured a democratic government, they would arrive in short order. Jonek knocked and entered with Furan entering close behind.

'You called, Minister?' Furan said, glaring at Jonek.

'I have been named Regent under the rules governing Code Titian. I name you as my successor as Minister of Science,' Dolan said.

Furan's expression of disdain wavered for just a moment, but it was enough for Dolan to see the true face of his former deputy. 'Remember the motto of the Ministry of Science: "The end of power is the beginning of knowledge." I hope you remember that.'

'Regent,' Furan said hesitantly. 'Code Titian is a holdover from the Old Government. If the First Prime is dead, then the elections should be held early.'

'A power vacuum was created by her death and Code Titian is meant to stop that vacuum from descending into civil war. That is why it was created in the first place. If you are unwilling to abide by its dictates then I will have no recourse but to have you stripped of your privileges.'

'I accept the position, Regent. But my Ministry of Science will not be as tolerant as yours of failures.'

'Failure in science is the only way to move forward. We learn from our failures.'

'Perhaps, but I do not want to have to deal with them.'

Dolan smiled wryly. 'Neither did I. That's why I hired you.'

Furan chuckled, and for the first time in many months, Dolan saw the smile reach to the older man's eyes. 'You are not as weak as I have thought you to be these many months.'

'Thank you, Minister Furan. If you'll excuse me, I have a planet to run.'

'Of course, Regent; may I just ask when I will be able to use this office as my own?'

Dolan looked at him without betraying how he truly felt about the man he had just named as his successor. 'This is currently the Office of the Regent until the Tower is rebuilt or another building takes its place. Please continue to use yours for now.'

Furan nodded and left the room, leaving Dolan and his aide to stare at the door. 'Regent, I have been informed that seven junior ministers are approaching the building.'

'Excellent; find Colonel Roka if he's still alive. I want to know what happened to the First Prime and where the rest of the Militia Elite are. Have Furan try to block the jamming signal that the rebels are using. We need to contact our ships and recall them.'

'Right away, Regent,' Jonek replied and hurried from the room again.

Dolan was now left alone to his own thoughts. He did not want to run the government but he knew all the players in politics and was sure that with the First Prime dead and the majority of the government in tatters, some of them would be sure to seize the opportunity to take control. He had only the Militia Elite to guard him, and they had done such a good job with Gexin, hadn't they? What he really needed was a way to hold the government together and keep his new political rivals bickering with each other until the elections when the people would decide who would leave them for the next five years. The elections were a full year away and this was about the time that the campaigns began.

Dolan knew that he needed an edge, and trying to bring religious harmony would do that—if he succeeded.

Chapter Two

Starbase 535

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55267.7 (April 8, 2378)

Over the last three days, Subcommander Sokal had spent much of her time ensconced in Commander Logan's quarters and provided him with far more information than he could ever have hoped for regarding the Reman situation and the lack of Romulan intelligence on the subject. He had passed it all to Starfleet Intelligence and they had thanked him, but then asked what the hell Sokal was actually doing in the Kursican sector, and he had no answer to give them, other than what she had given him, which was nowhere near good enough. Sokal was currently watching him with keen interest as he attempted once again to master Kal-toh and smiled when the shape become more distorted than it had been originally.

'Blast it!' Logan cursed.

'How long have you been try to complete this game?' Sokal asked.

'Eleven years now, but I have never come close.'

'There is a Romulan game that you might find slightly easier to play.'

'A new game?'

'It is an ancient game, devised during the Crossing from Vulcan to ch'Rihan.'

'Is it played on a board?'

'Yes, I will replicate one for you and provide instructions.'

His combadge chirped for attention. He hit the device a little harder than was necessary.

'Go ahead.'

'Sir, we've lost contact with the *Weisskopf* and the *Pytheas*. I can't raise either vessel on subspace,' Commander Osden replied.

'Try getting through to Starfleet.'

'Nothing, sir,' his exec replied. 'I'm not able to pick up any subspace signals from anywhere, not even from the Ynelavii and Resoto.'

Logan spared only a brief glance at Sokal. 'I'm on my way. Look for any spatial anomalies or anything that could cause a subspace radio blackout like this, Logan out.' He turned to the Subcommander. 'You'd better get back to your ship.'

'Do you think this is my doing?'

'Not at all, but it's not a natural phenomenon.'

Sokal agreed with the slight inclination of her head and spoke into her communicator. '*Hteij'rhau*.' She vanished in the haze of the transporter.

Logan sighed, deactivated the Kal-toh board and dashed out the door. Moments later he entered what should have been the quiet gamma shift of Operations only to find it abuzz with activity.

'Will someone please explain what is going on?'

'There's some kind of dampening field that's occurring sector-wide.'

'Do we have any communications?'

'We've lost all communications and we're no longer receiving telemetry from any of our satellite systems,' Osden answered as he tried opening another hailing frequency.

'Is it natural?' Logan asked, knowing the answer before it shot back at him.

'No sir, nothing natural we know can produce such an effect across such a large area.'

'Then someone wants us cut off from our ships, which is exactly what they've got. None of the runabouts have the speed or the range to reach the *Pytheas* before it gets to the *Weisskopf*, do they?'

Osden shook his head. 'There's nothing we can do, sir.'

'Prep a log buoy and shoot it toward Federation space. Hopefully it will pass

through the dampening field and get us some help sent over here.'

'You know what Starfleet will say, they can't spare any more ships.'

Logan leaned on the Core, the central table from which all station operations were handled. 'It's been four years and Starfleet is still stretched thin. Hell, some starbases have received no help in months. We've just got a brand new ship of the line.'

'That's heading into a trap.'

'Thank you, Hassan, for stating the blindingly obvious. My question is who?'

'None of the races in this sector have the capability for this. Something else is going on here.'

Logan suddenly knew exactly what was going on. Admiral Ranar had warned him about the aliens that were lurking around the sector, and they had both mistakenly believed that there was only one vessel prowling the space lanes wreaking havoc. Now he knew that there was something bigger at work, something that might cause a lot more problems, and something that Ranar was unlikely to give him enough information to adequately deal with. But knowing Starfleet brass the way he did, he was sure that they had a spy on at least one of those ships and that somehow the information would be leaked to those who could deal with it. Otherwise the situation did not bear thinking about.

'Commander, the *Gilded Talon* is decoupling from the starbase.'

'Get Sokal on the line, now!'

'Aye sir.'

'Where exactly are you going, Subcommander? You will be out of communications range as soon as you leave the starbase.'

'Unlike you, Commander, the Rihannsu are not worried about lack of communications. We will, as you humans are fond of saying, muddle through. Sokal out.'

'Let her go, we can't do anything to keep her here anyway. But I would still like to know what the hell she's doing so far from the Empire,' he said as the

Gilded Talon engaged her cloak and disappeared into the endless night.

'I take it then that she still hasn't given you a proper answer?' Osden asked.

'Not even close,' he replied and then increase his volume so he could be heard by everyone. 'I want to know the second we get a subspace signal from anywhere.'

'Aye sir,' Osden replied, issuing orders to the techs that manned Operations at this time of night.

'I'm going back to bed since there's nothing I can do. Wake me the second you get anything, understood?'

'Yes sir.'

Logan entered his quarters and lay down on the bed without taking his uniform off. He closed his eyes and thought back to the proposition of having a new game to play with. He just had to hope that whatever her own personal mission was in this gods-forsaken part of the galaxy, she would fulfil her promise and give him the game when she returned from wherever she was going.

Chapter Three

USS *Pytheas*

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55269.5 (April 9, 2378)

After fifty hours at high warp, the crew were ready to get down to some serious action. The ship was approaching the site where the *Weisskopf* and two other vessels had been standing off for two days, and had been unable to communicate with them for half that time since an unusual dampening field had knocked out all communication. Astar had even tried to get back in contact with *Starbase 535*, but to no avail. Whatever was blocking communications was doing a damn good job of it, and even her scientists and engineers hadn't been able to find a way around it. She paced around the bridge, glancing at Commander Wright and the others as she passed their stations.

Waiting was the hardest thing in a situation like this, and she hated the waiting game. Her former captain, Benjamin Walker, always told her that she better get good at the waiting game, because as a captain, it was the game she would be playing most often. Seated at her left, Wright was studying information on the screen between them and making notations as it scrolled down. He was concentrating on whatever he was reading and muttering to himself almost inaudibly, but she could hear him and she smiled. He was comfortable enough around her to be himself, and she knew that for the moment he wasn't planning on killing her.

'Captain, we're approaching the coordinates,' Ensign Daniel Larson called from the conn without turning round.

'Slow to impulse and raise shields, go to yellow alert.'

'Yellow alert, aye,' Gonzales replied from the tactical station.

'Slowing to impulse,' Larson responded.

'I'm picking up three vessels,' Gonzales replied. 'One is the *Weisskopf* and according to the ship profiles downloaded at the starbase, the second is Ynelavii. The third is unknown.'

'On screen,' Astar ordered.

Picking out the *Nova*-class *Weisskopf* was easy, holding station as it was between the other two. The Ynelavii cruiser was less than a million kilometres away from the Starfleet ship and the other one made her stare. It looked like a Starfleet vessel model kit put together blindly.

'Gonzales, tell me that isn't a Federation ship,' Astar said, standing and turning to face the other officer.

'It isn't, sir. It looks like one of ours, but the hull alloys are wrong and I can't scan beyond the hull itself. There's also something else. I'm not reading any energy signatures coming from those nacelle-like protrusions. It looks like there is, but sensors are picking up nothing.'

'Are you telling me that it doesn't use a traditional warp drive?'

'I don't know,' Gonzales replied, 'but if it doesn't, why does it have nacelles?'

'I am more worried about knowing where these aliens got our designs from,' Wright added.

'Maybe they didn't,' Larson interjected. 'It's a simplistic design. Just because we haven't seen any race that uses it, doesn't mean there aren't any.'

'Good point, Ensign,' Astar said. 'See if you can hail the *Weisskopf*.'

'That dampening field is still in effect, sir. I can't get through.'

'We need to communicate somehow.'

'Captain, may I recommend we take a shuttle and dock with the alien vessel. Our priority should be dealing with the medical issues,' Wright said.

Astar wholeheartedly agreed, especially since two of the people on that vessel were Federation citizens. 'Gonzales, have the *Jarvis* prepped and tell Doctor Maxx to get his team ready for insertion. I want it ready to go in fifteen minutes. I will take the *Scobee* to the *Weisskopf* and try to contact the Ynelavii vessel. Wright, you'll have the bridge.'

'Aye sir, Wright replied. 'You have security with you on both shuttlecraft.'

'Gonzales, have Parker send two security officers in the *Jarvis* and I want her with me. It will just be the two of us on the *Scobee*.'

'Aye sir, can I ask why only two on the *Jarvis*?'

'I think that will be enough. I just want to find out what is going on here.'

'What if the Ynelavii attack?'

'Commander Wright?' Astar asked.

'We target their weapons only,' he replied absently and continued scanning the information on his console.

She glared at him for a second, which he was oblivious to, but turned back to Gonzales. 'Understood, Commander?'

'Yes sir.'

'Let's get to it.'

The others moved to follow their orders and only then did Wright look up from what he was doing, wiping the console's screen before Astar sat down.

'Something I shouldn't see?'

'Not that I'm aware of, Captain,' he replied with an insincere smile. 'I was just checking the crew forums to see if there was anything that I should be aware of.'

'And?' Astar asked, interested as she never bothered checking the crew's interactions on the message boards.

'Only speculation about the mission and my being on this ship, nothing major.'

'Please share, perhaps they're getting close without really knowing it.'

Wright hesitated. 'It's really not that interesting, Captain.'

Astar leaned in closer. 'You weren't checking the message boards were you?'

The first officer held the captain's gaze for a moment. 'No, I wasn't.'

'What were you doing?'

'Looking at the local subspace configuration.'

'Why?'

'Because I know that nothing natural can effect subspace in such a wide area without leaving some clue as to how,' Wright replied.

'How do you know that?'

'I'm well-rounded, Captain. Someone is doing this, somehow, and they're only affecting a part of subspace, otherwise we wouldn't be able to go to warp.'

Astar frowned. 'I hadn't thought of that. Speak with Mahtani and the science team about this this wrinkle and see if they can't find a way around it. If not, then we'll have to find another way of communicating for the meantime.'

'And if it never stops?'

'We'll figure something out, Commander. In future, don't lie to me. You're the first officer, you're supposed to help.'

'Aye sir.'

Chapter Four

USS *Pytheas*

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55269.6 (April 9, 2378)

Arlon Maxx looked around at his team. Both of them were older than him, but he was the chief medical officer. Each of them had a speciality that he would need on this mission and as he glanced around at them, he smiled. His own speciality was genetics, Crewman Katik Swha's expertise was in microbiology and virology, and Crewman Mikhail Kornilov's speciality was pathology and forensics, and they might need the latter, but they definitely needed the former.

They were in the shuttlebay waiting for Lieutenant Ryan McNamara, the deputy security chief, to finish the pre-flight checks. The red-headed human emerged from the type-eleven shuttlecraft and held up his hand to prevent them gaining access. Maxx was about to ask why when the internal shuttlebay doors opened and a Rigellian-Chelon entered. Ensign Faragas was the youngest of the security team aboard the ship but he was also the biggest, and if there were any problems aboard the alien vessel, his presence would help to keep things from getting out of control.

'Any problems, Faragas?'

'No, sir,' the Chelon answered. 'Is my chair aboard?'

'It is, at the rear of the shuttle. Gentlemen, and lady, this way. I will be your pilot. I would ask that you carry no weapons, they will impede your work and we are quite capable of protecting you.'

'I never carry a weapon,' Maxx replied. 'We have enough to carry with our equipment, and we'll need to be in the Hazardous Material EVA suits.'

McNamara sighed. 'They're in the storage lockers as you requested. May I ask what is wrong with the standard EVA suits?'

Maxx stared at the security officer like he was an idiot. 'The standard EVA suits don't have triple protection against biological hazards, and they don't have the range of movement needed for us to do our jobs. I would suggest that you get five HM EVA suits so you two can wear them as well.'

'There are no suits designed for me, Doctor,' Faragas said. 'But no humanoid viruses affect my species.'

'None that we know of, Ensign. Take whatever precautions you can.'

'Aye sir,' the Chelon replied and entered the shuttle, pulling out special headgear that would protect him from airborne viruses, microbes and bacteria.

'Are we ready to depart?' McNamara asked once everyone had donned their HM EVA suits. 'The Captain is ready to go.'

'We're ready,' Maxx answered, settling into his seat and noting that the others were doing the same.

'Launching now,' he said.

The shuttlecraft *Jarvis*, named for astronaut Gregory Jarvis killed when the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded in 1986, lifted off from the deck and passed through the forcefield into space. Launched from shuttlebay two, and flying parallel was the *Scobee*, named for astronaut Dick Scobee who also died in the *Challenger* explosion, with Captain Astar and Lieutenant Parker aboard. The two type-11 shuttles engaged on their separate courses. From one of the windows, Maxx caught sight of the alien vessel getting closer and he couldn't help but notice the similarities between it and two classes of Federation vessel. He was still staring at it when the shuttle was rocked by an impact.

'What the hell?!'

'It would appear that the Ynelavii vessel would rather we didn't reach the alien vessel,' Faragas replied as McNamara began evasive manoeuvres.

'So it seems.'

'Astar to Jarvis, respond.'

'We're here, Captain,' McNamara replied. 'The Ynelavii's weapons aren't as powerful as we thought. Guess you managed to cut through the jamming signal.'

'Just stay out of their firing solution,' she said. 'They're not attacking us. And for your information, Lieutenant, we haven't solved the communications problem.'

It just dropped out.'

'I guess they really want to destroy that ship.'

'We're not going to give them the chance,' Astar muttered. 'What the hell is taking so long? Scobee to Pytheas.'

McNamara winced at the static that exploded on the open channel before Astar's voice cut out.

'We should head back,' Faragas said, holding on as McNamara instituted another gut-wrenching turn to keep the shuttlecraft out of the line of fire.

'We have a mission to complete,' Maxx interjected. 'Take us to the alien vessel and let us cure these people.'

'They might not be infected, it was only a possibility,' McNamara suggested.

'Then why are we being fired upon?' Maxx asked pointedly.

McNamara didn't have an answer to that one.

'The Ynelavii ship has stopped firing,' Maxx pointed out, looking at the readouts in front of him. 'No one fired at them. What the hell is happening out there?'

'I have no idea, but communications have gone again. We're on our own.'

'Approaching the alien vessel, nearing post-side docking port.'

'How close is it to standard Starfleet?'

'It will do,' Swha said, leaning forward and looking at the hatch as they connected.

'We have a soft seal.'

'Let's get moving,' Maxx said, rising from the co-pilot's chair.

'I'm in charge here, Doctor,' McNamara stood firm with a phaser pointed at the doctor.

'No you're not; I am since this is a medical mission. You're here solely to make sure that we don't get killed. Swha, Kornilov, pick up your gear and let's go.'

'I'll take point,' Faragas said, whipping out his phaser and slinging the phaser rifle onto his back.

'I'll bring up the rear,' McNamara muttered.

He didn't like the idea of the hulking Chelon taking point but Faragas could take a couple of shots to his scales before he felt the pain, which made him a better choice for the lead. The five Starfleet personnel made their way onto the alien ship and found no one waiting for them at the airlock, until they turned the corner.

Chapter Five

USS *Pytheas*

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55269.7 (April 9, 2378)

Commander Wright glanced up at the viewscreen at Gonzales' strangled shout. The Ynelavii vessel had fired in the *Jarvis*' direction and McNamara had now engaged in evasive manoeuvres to prevent further hits. His actions were only partially successful.

'Commander, return fire, target their weapons only.'

'Sir, tactical is not responding,' Gonzales replied.

Wright jumped up and hurried over to the tactical station. 'Get down to tactical control and target manually,' he ordered.

'Aye sir.'

'We've been sabotaged, sir,' Talen said from operations. 'I'm picking up unusual energy signatures from tactical control.'

'Do they match anything on record?'

'No sir, but they are similar to the readings taken by Doctor Vallejo aboard the *Weisskopf*...'

'The shields should be preventing it. I need communications with someone out there!'

'Sir, the Ynelavii cruiser has stopped firing and the *Jarvis* is continuing on course for the alien vessel,' Larson said.

'What about the Captain?'

'Still on course for the *Weisskopf*, sir.'

'Wright to Lieutenant Mahtani.'

'*Mahtani here, sir.*'

'Lieutenant, get your science teams working on a way to block psionic activity penetrating the ship using the shields.'

'Aye sir, Mahtani out.'

'Wright to Security.'

'D'rass here, sir.'

'Get a security team down to tactical control and help Commander Gonzales. I believe you'll find a saboteur,' he told the Caitian security officer.

'Aye sir, on my way.'

He knew that when Astar got back to the ship she would have a few choice words for him, but he didn't expect a saboteur on a Starfleet vessel. While he waited for his crew to do their job, he watched the viewscreen hoping that he would actually see something. The Captain had docked with the *Weisskopf* and the doctor had managed to get aboard the alien vessel with no further incident, but since the communication dampening field had fluttered momentarily, he knew that whoever was doing it wasn't perfect. Striding over to the tactical station, he stopped when he realised who was there. He always made a point of knowing the security personnel so he could avoid them after committing his crimes.

'Cadet Snowcroft, the subspace dampening field hiccupped a little while ago, were you able to pinpoint its origin point?'

She smiled a little, eager to please. 'Yes sir, it originated from the alien ship.'

'Can we disable the dampening field?'

'No, sir,' she answered, shaking her head vigorously. 'Our phasers wouldn't be able to penetrate the hull, and we can't risk using torpedoes, even with a low-yield.'

He grimaced, not liking the situation one bit. 'Do you have any other suggestions, Cadet?'

'No sir.'

'Next time, don't anticipate. Wait for a question.'

'Aye sir,' Snowcroft replied, glancing around for someone to help her.

The Andorian came to her rescue. 'Commander, we could try a burst of Kreiger waves.'

'Never heard of them,' Wright said.

'They were developed by a scientist called Nel Apgar who wanted to develop it for a weapon, rather than a new energy source which Starfleet had contracted him to do. He was killed trying to murder Commander Riker of the *Enterprise*, but his project was a success. Starfleet have spent the last fourteen years working on refining the technology for both uses.'

'And?'

'It has its uses as a weapon, but not yet as a new source of energy.'

'How soon can we get that dampening field down?'

'It will take about two hours to replicate the Kreiger wave converter, and then we'll need to use a shuttle to get as close to the alien ship as possible.'

'Get on it, unless the doctor and his medical team can figure out there are still enemy combatants alive over there, we'll need this so we can communicate with everyone and find out what is going on.'

'Aye sir.'

'Gonzales to bridge.'

'Go ahead, Commander.'

'I've managed to fix the damage done to the phaser controls, but there's no sign of a saboteur, no sign that there was even anyone here.'

'Thank you, Commander. Have D'rass set up surveillance just in case it happens again.'

'Aye sir, Gonzales out.'

'If it wasn't a saboteur, what was it?' Larson asked, turning away from the

helm.

'It was a saboteur, Ensign. They just covered their tracks damn well.'

'So it was someone who knows this ship inside out.'

'Unfortunately, that doesn't narrow it down much, Ensign. Half the engineers and crewman have been on board since the deck was welded into place,' Wright replied. 'We'll deal with the saboteur later, but right now I want to know what is going on out there.'

'Sir, it's possible that the Captain has figured out the same thing we have and is at this moment also trying to figure out a way around it,' Lieutenant Mahtani said, having arrived on the bridge moments earlier.

'Good of you to join us, Lieutenant. What do you have for me?'

'Commander Troi of the *Enterprise* came up with a psionic shield several years ago. I've input the modifications into our shields, so we shouldn't have any further trouble.'

Wright smiled. 'Excellent work, now let's see if we can break through the communications interference.'

'I have a theory on that as well, sir.'

'I'm listening.'

'We could try an old form of communications that doesn't rely on subspace.'

'Such as?'

'Tachyon communication.'

'Explain.'

'Tachyons travel at faster than light speeds and several Federation races attached communications to tachyons before the advent of subspace communication. I think we can communicate with the *Weisskopf* using that same technology.'

'Is anyone there going to pick it up?'

'There's no way to tell, but it is possible that they will detect a tachyon surge and investigate it.'

'Get on it. I presume you'll need the deflector dish?'

'Yes sir.'

'You'll have it.'

'Aye sir,' Mahtani replied and headed back to the turbolift.

Chapter Six

Resoto-control alien vessel

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55269.8 (April 9, 2378)

The five Starfleet personnel halted as they faced a group of unfamiliar aliens with unfamiliar weapons. The Chelon held fire long enough to make sure that the aliens didn't fire themselves and then lowered the phaser rifle. The aliens still held theirs but at a bark from another alien, all the weapons were lowered. A canine trotted through the pack, then stood on its hind legs and behind it stood Melex, the Denobulan they'd come to rescue. Melex stepped forward to stand alongside the canine and looked at the suited figures, and the Chelon.

'On behalf of the Resoto Hegemony, welcome aboard the *Guxendur*,' Melex said.

'Your pronunciation is all wrong,' the canine muttered with a grin.

'I'm doing the best I can with my language,' Melex replied sourly and turned to the Starfleet officers. 'This is High Lord Yannik, the head of the Resoto Hegemony, and now the commander of this vessel.'

'What of the aliens who used to command it?' McNamara asked.

'We found many of them dead but no trace of the rest. We don't know how they escaped since there are no escape pods or transporter systems.'

'Where they've gone is my concern,' McNamara replied. 'Curing you all and returning you to your respective homeworlds is his.'

'Doctor Arlon Maxx. Who came up with the idea that you'd been infected?'

'I did,' said an alien that Maxx didn't recognise. 'I am Deronian and I am a doctor on my world. I have seen the results of the infections that others have been given in the experiments.'

'Why are we not showing symptoms?' Yannik asked.

'That's simple,' Maxx answered. 'You could all be carriers for the disease. There's no point infecting someone if they die before reaching a population

centre, so you create carriers who spread the disease. I want to do a full blood work-up on all of you before I allow anyone to leave this ship. The last thing I want to happen is for you to kill your entire species.'

Murmurs and mutterings did the rounds of the assembled aliens. 'I want to get off this ship, the Resoto are my enemies,' one of the Ynelavii said loudly.

'And you will, once I've cured you. The *Oxelus* is waiting to take you home.'

'Never heard of the ship,' he said, 'but I know who it is named for, we will wait,' he added, indicating the woman beside him.

'My wife has been infected and is already showing symptoms, Doctor,' Melex said.

'Is she in isolation?'

'Yes, but the disease appears to be species-specific. Will I get symptoms?'

'Unlikely, if you're the carrier. But I want to make sure in any case. Swha, I want you to go to the isolation unit and check on the woman, get someone to show you the way. Kornilov, you're with me.'

'Aye sir.'

'Take blood samples and start analysing them. I want both of you to look for anything that might be a virus, or that might be hiding one, dismissed.'

'I'll return to the bridge once my sample has been taken, I need to make sure that no one surprises us,' Yannik said. 'Did you block our communications?'

'No, we assumed it was the aliens who built this ship,' McNamara answered. 'I still want to know how they...'

'Lieutenant?' Maxx asked.

'You said there were no escape pods or transporters?'

'That's right.'

'Then either they've utilised another method of travel or they're still here.'

'What other method of travel is there?'

'Considering how advanced these aliens are, I would say that anything is possible,' Faragas said.

'Ensign?'

'I've been scanning for energy traces and I picked this up,' he let McNamara look at the tricorder. 'It looks like a hole in the middle of the ship.'

The deputy security chief let out a curse. 'Damn Iconians.'

'The gateways?'

'Did these aliens steal it?'

'Possibly.'

'That means that they are a far older civilisation than any of us thought.'

'Whoever they are, we've on this ship for days and have so far been unable to translate any of their language, not even their name,' Melex said.

'The Iconians were supposedly wiped out by an orbital bombardment about two hundred millennia ago, is it possible that these aliens were responsible for that bombardment?'

'For what reason?'

'To get the gateways technology and use it for themselves,' Faragas speculated. 'They've had two hundred thousand years to improve on it.'

'The gateway on board this ship is obviously different as the Iconian ones were stationary. This one is able to move and still be operational,' McNamara replied.

'It might not be a gateway.'

'True, but for now it is our best theory. Faragas, you stay here with the docs and I'll go and find it, and hopefully shut it down.'

'You won't be able to,' Kornilov said. 'I remember reading that once the

gateway has exhausted its own power, it uses whatever is close by. The hiccup in the communication was probably the gateway switching to this ship's power.'

'So the only way to shut it down is to destroy the ship? Wonderful, I'm sure that Yannik won't go for that.'

'Then we have to make sure that none of the aliens can use it.'

'Fine, go and do it then,' Maxx said. 'We need to get on with our work.'

McNamara scowled at the doctor but realised that he was right. 'If I need help, I'll yell,' he said and set off down a corridor.

Maxx and Kornilov continued to take blood samples and analyse them. It was Kornilov who found the key. 'Doctor, I think I have it.'

'Let me see,' Maxx stepped over to look at the screen of the analyser. 'You may be right, a genetically-engineered prion that has been made to target specific genomes. It's genius.'

'Is there any way to cure these people?' Kornilov asked sotto voce.

'Yes, but I need access to the medical computer on the ship to do it. Let's hope McNamara can shut down the gateway.'

Chapter Seven

Resoto Vessel *Guxendur*

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55269.8 (April 9, 2378)

Ryan McNamara hated running about ships with a phaser. He much preferred using the tactical station on the bridge to deal out damage to alien vessels that encroached on Federation territory. It was what he had signed up for. Instead, he gets to run down alien corridors that all look alike with a phaser that might not affect an alien race using advanced ancient technology to cause trouble.

He paused outside the room that his tricorder indicated had the unusual energy readings. It literally read as a hole in the ship. The doors opened at his approach and he entered, phaser raised. There was no one here currently but the gateway in the centre of the room was active, connected to some kind of control centre. Deciding on caution instead of valour, he aimed his phaser through the gateway at a hairy humanoid and fired. The beam passed through the gateway and the alien collapsed to the floor. McNamara ducked as three beams passed over his head and he rolled across the room before firing again.

This time the beam hit a control console and it shorted out but the aliens were still firing. Two reptilian aliens and one insectoid-looking creature were coming through to finish him off. He couldn't let that happen, especially since no one else on board this ship knew what was happening.

'McNamara to Faragas; I'm going through the gateway to cut off the problem at the source. If I don't make it back, protect the docs at all costs.'

'Lieutenant, that's suicide,' the Chelon replied. 'You have no idea what you'll be facing.'

'Don't argue; just follow orders, McNamara out.'

He set his phaser to kill as another beam went wide and made a hole in the bulkhead where he'd been standing a moment ago. Switching his tricorder to scan and record mode, and leaving it at the entrance to the gateway, McNamara ran through, and found himself aboard a vessel or space station similar to where he had been. Everything looked the same, even down to the aliens that began firing at him as he ran into their midst. He returned fire, ducking behind a console. The reptilians and insectoids had him pinned down and if he didn't get back soon, the stunned reptilian would wake up and do

who knows what damage to his ship.

McNamara winced as a bolt of energy erupted to his right and he crouched lower. He didn't want to fire blindly so he put his head up for a second and let off three shots at the aliens he could see. They went down as he returned to his crouching position. Just as well as a whole barrage of shots peppered the console he hid behind.

'I'm not your enemy,' he shouted, wondering if they would understand him.

'Your galaxy has been targeted for conquer,' a reptilian replied. 'All your pathetic species will bow to the might of the Cha'lav Hegemony.'

'The Federation will never yield. We'll fight until the last man.'

'All the better for us then.'

McNamara scowled and put his head up again, firing another four shots with pinpoint accuracy. 'We'll make sure you regret ever coming to this galaxy.'

'You need to survive first,' the same reptilian replied, moving around the room, toward the gateway.

'So do you,' he yelled, rolling out of his hiding place and shooting down half a dozen reptilians and insectoids, the remaining lifeforms in the room in fact.

He stood and surveyed the room, and the bodies. It would appear from the available evidence that the insectoids and reptilians were leading the fight in the galaxy, but he had gained some valuable information in his little exchange, and needed to survive to get it home. Knowing that he wouldn't be able to shut down the gateway on this side, he stepped back through in time to see the other one begin to stir.

McNamara stood over him, pointing his phaser at the alien's head.

'What do you want?' the reptilian asked.

'Shut down the gateway.'

'What do you know of the Gateways?'

'I know it is Iconian technology, did you steal it from them?'

The alien laughed. 'How little you know. The Iconians were pathetic upstarts who stole the technology from us, before coming to this little backwater galaxy. By the time we found them they had built a nice little empire for themselves. We put a stop to that straight away.'

'Well, that's a nice little story, but are you going to shut it down, or not?'

The alien looked up. 'You'll never win. It has been foretold.'

'Shut it down, or you die here and now.'

'Never!' the reptilian laughed again, trying to rise.

'Fine,' McNamara replied and hit the alien on the head with the butt of his phaser.

As the alien slumped to the ground, McNamara wondered how he was going to shut it down himself before more of the Cha'lav found their way through. As he looked round the room, he saw a series of blinking lights on another console and aimed his phaser.

'I hope to God this works.'

He fired and the gateway vanished as if it had never been there.

'Faragas to McNamara, are you all right?'

'I'm fine,' the deputy chief replied. 'The gateway's been shut down.'

'Have you tried contacting the ship?'

'Not yet, how are the docs doing?'

'Their best,' Faragas replied.

'I'm on my way back up with a prisoner.'

'Acknowledged, Faragas out.'

'McNamara to *Pytheas*.'

'Go ahead, Lieutenant,' Wright replied.

'Communication has been restored. You'll have my full report when I return to the ship.'

'Can't you tell me anything?'

'Not on an open comm line, sir. I have valuable intelligence regarding the alien threat.'

'Very well, I'm sure the Captain will be glad to hear your report, Pytheas out.'

McNamara grabbed the reptilian and picked him up, hauling him onto his shoulder. A prisoner of war for interrogation, this was more like it.

Chapter Eight

USS *Weisskopf*

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55269.9 (April 9, 2378)

Commander Dhrex met Captain Astar and Lieutenant Parker in the main shuttlebay. He was surprised to see them, though he knew that he shouldn't have been, but Parker looked as though she had been expecting all of this.

'Captain, Lieutenant. I'm glad you could join us again.'

'Thank you for opening the shuttlebay doors,' Astar said.

'You're welcome. May I ask to what I owe the pleasure?'

Astar glared at a very impassive Parker and then turned back to Dhrex. 'I have evidence to suggest that much larger forces are at work in this sector and I need your help to deal with them.'

'The communication dampening field?'

'Yes.'

'Follow me,' he gestured to the internal shuttlebay doors that led into the corridor. 'My people tell me it is emanating from the alien vessel.'

'Lieutenant, is he correct?'

'Yes sir.'

'Can you tell me anything else?'

'No sir.'

'Lieutenant, if you know something that could help us, you are obligated to reveal it,' Dhrex said with steel.

'Sir, with all due respect, you don't have the requisite security clearance. Neither does Captain Astar.'

Astar scowled. 'How is Captain Drummond?'

'He's still fighting.'

'He won't win, no one ever has,' Parker muttered, but they both heard her.

'Enough of this secretive nonsense, what exactly is going on?' Astar asked matching Dhrex's steel.

'I can't tell you what is going on, and I shouldn't have said that, but I don't want to see history repeat itself. The best I can do is provide you with a deflector shield modulation that will enable the Captain to fight on a level playing field.'

'About time,' Astar muttered and heard raised voices coming from around the corner.

They stopped and listened.

'You were the point man on this mission, Murdoch,' Marshall said. 'It's your responsibility to report your own intelligence to your handler.'

'And you're not my handler anymore?'

'I was assigned as your backup for this assignment, and you were assigned a new handler.'

'Who?'

'I don't know, I wasn't informed before the *Pytheas* left *Starbase 185*.'

'Can you at least find out for me?'

'No, I won't. Do your job and report your intelligence,' Marshall replied. 'I'll see you in our quarters later.'

'Fine, I just hope you don't get reassigned again to somewhere we can't keep in touch. I've missed you.'

'I missed you too, Miles.'

'Nice to know,' Murdoch shot back. 'I have work to do, excuse me.'

Astar turned to Dhrex. 'They're lovers? I didn't know that.'

'I don't think Starfleet Intelligence knows it either,' Dhrex replied with a slight smile. 'Please feel free to head up to the bridge and get those shield modulations online.'

Parker nodded, 'Aye sir.'

'If you'll excuse me.'

As Dhrex headed round the corner to speak with Murdoch, Astar and Parker made their way to the bridge.

'Why did you agree to help him?'

'I saw a number of my friends fall to the same fate as Captain Drummond. None survived and by the time we figured out a way to help them, it was too late.'

'Too late how, Lieutenant?'

'I'm sorry, sir. I can't tell you what happened, I would be violating the...' she stopped talking.

Astar's eyes narrowed. 'Prime Directive?'

'No sir.'

'Only two things supersede the Prime Directive, and one of them you shouldn't know about, which only leaves the other.'

Parker looked at Astar. 'Don't make me give you an answer, sir.'

'Don't worry, whatever you know will come out. Either because we discover it ourselves, or because you decide that your history isn't going to repeat itself.'

'Thank you, sir.'

A lieutenant was in the command chair when they reached the bridge and as Parker approached the tactical console to help adjust the shields, a voice spluttered over the communications channel. '*Wright to Weisskopf.*'

'Lieutenant sh'Freen here, go ahead.'

'Lieutenant, is Captain Astar there with you.'

'She is.'

'What is it, Commander?'

'Doctor Maxx is on his way back to the ship to try and find a cure for the virus, which he says has been genetically engineered, and Ensign Faragas reports that the aliens aboard that vessel used some kind of gateway to escape back to wherever they came from. Lieutenant McNamara was able to shut down the communications dampening field by shutting down the gateway, and he captured one of the aliens. He also says he has some useful information for us.'

'Excellent work, I'll be returning to the ship shortly. Have the prisoner ready for interrogation.'

'Aye sir, Wright out.'

'I heard,' Dhrex said from the turbolift, sh'Freen patched it through to me.

'Good work.'

'Can I speak with the Ynelavii vessel?'

'The *Oxelus*? Of course. Banks, open a channel to General Allak.'

'This is General Allak, I see that we have communication capability back.'

'General, I am Captain Astar of the *Pytheas*. I will forgive you for firing on my vessel if you agree to send a security officer to our ship to observe our interrogation of a captured prisoner. You have the right to do so.'

'I accept your offer,' Allak replied. 'I will be the security officer.'

'I'll have my ship prepare to receive you,' Astar replied.

'Very well, Allak out.'

'Lieutenant, have you made the modifications?'

'Yes sir, there should be an almost immediate improvement.'

'Commander?' Astar turned to Dhrex.

'Doctor, how's the Captain?'

'I don't know what you did, Commander, but it seems to have evened the fight.'

'I'll tell you what I can, Dhrex out.'

'Commander, if you'd like to join us.'

'I'd love to, it would be nice to know who or what is tearing this sector apart.'

Chapter Nine

USS Pytheas

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55270.1 (April 9, 2378)

Captain Astar, Commander Dhrex, Lieutenant Parker and General Allak stood outside the cell which housed the Cha'lav-Reptilian. Lieutenant McNamara's intelligence which he gleamed from another one of the aliens appeared to be solid judging from Parker's expressions during the debriefing. Now they watched the alien pace his cell, testing the forcefield occasionally to see if there was a way to break out. He stopped suddenly to regard the assembled interrogators.

'You will learn nothing from me. I have been trained to withstand torture.'

'You've never heard Klingon opera,' Parker muttered and Astar smirked.

'We won't torture you, that's not our way,' Astar said. 'All we're going to do is ask you a few questions about why you're here and what you're planning to do.'

'You will learn nothing from me.'

'We'll see,' Dhrex said and leaned against the far bulkhead.

The reptilian looked at them. 'When does the interrogation begin?'

'It already has,' Allak answered. 'How long has that vessel of yours been prowling our galaxy?'

'I will tell you nothing.'

'Computer, play Mordred's Lament in cell three for thirty seconds,' Parker said.

'Lieutenant, that is torture and I will not allow it,' Astar replied half-heartedly as the first strains of the opera began.

They could not hear it but the reptilian could and he immediately collapsed to the floor, clapping his hands around his ears. When it stopped and he regained his footing, holding onto the bed, he stared at them.

'An effective technique.'

'Lieutenant?' Astar asked.

'The Cha'lav aural cavities are far more sensitive than even the Ferengi. For us, it is painful to listen to. For them it is the worst kind of torture.'

'I won't ask how you know that.'

'Probably wise, sir.'

'Banks to Dhrex,' the Weisskopf's executive officer called over the comm.

'Dhrex here, go ahead.'

'We're receiving a distress call from asteroid DN-612, priority alpha-two.'

'Captain, I will have to take my leave of you,' Dhrex said. 'One to beam up.'

'I will ask again, how long have you been in this galaxy?'

'Two hundred years,' he replied.

'What?' Astar yelled. 'That can't be true.'

'It is, sir,' Parker replied.

Astar sighed. 'Why are you here?'

The alien considered the question. 'There is no harm in telling you, you will find out soon enough. The Cha'lav Hegemony is expanding its reach and your galaxy has been selected as the next target.'

'You're going to conquer us?' Allak asked, incredulous. 'The entire galaxy?'

The alien laughed. 'The Hegemony has already conquered two hundred and sixty thousand galaxies in its aeons-long history. Yours will just be one more.'

Parker stepped up to the forcefield and whispered. 'I've seen how you fight, *tra'las'ran*. My people lost in the future but we brought everything we learned to everywhere in the past. We'll stop you this time, and your entire will

collapse. I will see to it.'

'Lieutenant, step back,' Astar ordered. 'What was that word you used? The translator couldn't parse it.'

'It is one of their words, Captain. It's closest translation means friend-rival, a term of address used for long-time enemies. Particularly apt in my case.'

'I think you need a break.'

'I will answer no more of your questions,' the reptilian said.

'We have enough for now,' Astar replied and left the brig, followed by Parker and Allak. Faragas re-entered the room to stand guard.

As they walked toward the bridge, Astar considered her next move. She should return to the starbase to drop off the prisoner but there was still the matter of the doctor helping the aliens on the Resoto-controlled Cha'lav ship, including Melex and his dying wife. There was no choice for her to make, she had to stay and hope that a cure could be found. In the meantime, there was the matter of the Ynelavii.

'General, will you wait for my doctor to heal your citizens?'

'I would love to, Captain. However, I must return to my homeworld. A few hours ago I received word that First Prime Gexin was assassinated. My world is in turmoil and I must do what I can to assist in the formation of the new government. I stayed only to learn what the alien could tell us, and I believe I have learned plenty.'

'As have we all,' Astar replied. 'I'll escort you to the transporter room.'

'We have only just discovered this technology, you seem to have had it a long time,' the general said.

'A little over two hundred years,' Astar replied and noticed Parker a couple of steps behind, a sad look on her face.

'I suppose it has come in handy over the years.'

'More than you can know. Perhaps you might consider joining the Federation. We could use more allies, especially if a war is coming.'

Allak smiled. 'I will pass on my recommendation to the new First Prime, perhaps he will be amenable to such a joining. After all, we have our own little alliance in this sector and it has served us well for some time.'

'Let us know what you decide,' Astar said as they entered the transporter room.

'Goodbye, Captain. I hope we meet again.'

Parker turned to her once the general had gone. 'Sir, I think there are a few things I need to tell you.'

'If it will violate the temporal prime directive I don't want to hear it.'

'Sir?'

'I don't like secrets, but you've helped us twice today. Giving Captain Drummond a fighting chance and getting at least something from the Cha'lav. I hope that better interrogators are able to get more from him.'

'They will, sir. We'll be more prepared this time.'

Astar smiled grimly. 'You know that for a fact, do you?'

'Yes sir, I do. I can you that I wasn't the only one sent back. Eleven of us were, to different points in Starfleet's history to provide certain information at critical junctures.'

'Was it difficult?'

'It was our last hope, Captain. We sacrificed everything we had left to make the ploy in the hope that it would work. All I can say for sure, is that my future no longer exists. Some events have changed, but not all of them for the better.'

Chapter Ten

USS Pytheas

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55270.2 (April 9, 2378)

Doctor Arlon Maxx was at his desk studying the Cha'lav-created prion disease and running simulations on the computer when Lieutenant Parker walked in. She looked around to make sure no one was around and then ordered the computer to seal the doors to sickbay.

'Lieutenant?'

'We have a Cha'lav-Reptilian in custody,' she told him. 'And we've interrogated him but I don't think he'll give us anything else without torture.'

Maxx's features hardened. 'I won't be a party to torture, and I'll report this conversation.'

Parker chuckled. 'I'm not advocating it, Doctor. Suffice it to say that I don't think it would do any good anyway. What I want from you is a complete bioscan of him.'

'Lieutenant, don't insult my intelligence. I'm not giving you the means to create a biological weapon against his species, or any other, either. And I will be reporting this conversation, whether you like it or not.'

She stepped forward. 'Doctor, I don't care if you report this to the Captain. I'm more aware of what the Cha'lav are capable of than anybody else on board, perhaps anyone living, and I don't intend to let them gain the upper hand. I will do whatever it takes to stop a war from happening.'

'Didn't the Dominion war teach you anything?' the doctor asked, disgusted.

'That wasn't my war, Doctor. I only learned about it in my history class. And before you go running off half-cocked, remember that you were the one who brought up the idea of biological warfare. I was only going to ask that you provide with a complete bioscan without telling the Captain.'

'What are you going to do with it, if not create a weapon?' he asked, not quite believing her.

Parker fell back on her standby phrase. 'That's classified.'

Maxx snorted. 'Whatever. I'll get you the bioscan, but the moment I find out you've done something with it that I find issue with, you'll be in the brig.'

'Deal,' she replied and held out her hand.

Maxx took her hand and shook it. 'I'll be watching you.'

She smiled. 'Computer, unseal the doors.'

Seconds later she was gone and Maxx was alone in sickbay. Deciding to do the deed sooner rather than later, he grabbed a medical tricorder and headed for the brig. When he arrived, he found the captain talking to the alien as if they were just having a chat. She saw him before he could back out.

'Doctor, what brings you here?'

He hated lying, mostly because he wasn't very good at it and tended to blush a brighter shade of blue. 'I'd like to take a bioscan of the prisoner, Captain.'

She frowned. 'Why?'

'I would like to know whether his body is suffering any ill effects from being in our galaxy. From what I understand, he doesn't come from the Milky Way.'

Astar nodded and Maxx approached.

'This won't hurt,' he told the alien as he opened the medical tricorder and began to take a comprehensive scan.

Maxx saw Astar move away from the forcefield and stepped forward.

'Doctor, why now? He's been in custody for several hours.'

'I've been concentrating on trying to find a cure for the prion disease. I have the computer running simulations and correlating the results. There's nothing more I can do at this time.'

'You could have asked for the prisoner to be brought to sickbay.'

'Lieutenant Parker would have said it is an unacceptable security risk,' Maxx

replied.

'That's never stopped you before,' she stated and that brought him up short.

He closed the tricorder and turned to face her. 'Lieutenant Parker asked for the bioscan, without telling you.'

'Did she give a reason?'

'She told me it was classified.'

Astar nodded. 'It'll be our secret. She has her own agenda here, something that has a security clearance up to the highest levels of Command, and I certainly don't want to get in the way. Give her whatever she asks for but keep me in the loop.'

'Aye sir.'

'Be careful, Arlon,' she said and left the brig, leaving him alone with a single security guard and the prisoner.

'What's your name?' Maxx asked as he opened the tricorder again.

'Is this a new interrogation technique?' the alien asked.

'No, I'm just curious. I don't know what you may have heard about the Federation, but we're not going to torture and kill you. As a prisoner you'll be treated courteously unless you try to escape and you'll be released when we're no longer in danger from the Cha'lav.'

'Then I will not be released.'

'You won't die from unnatural causes,' the Bolian told him. 'You will be treated with respect.'

The alien smiled. 'Does that include Mordred's Lament?'

Maxx winced. 'Lieutenant Parker has a singular sense of humour.'

'She knows how to hurt me,' the alien stood and stepped closer to the forcefield. The guard raised his phaser. 'She knows a lot about my people, more than anybody else.'

'Yes, she does,' Maxx replied, narrowing his eyes and closing the tricorder. 'I think I have all I need.'

He left the brig at an unhurried pace and as soon as the doors were closed breathed a sigh of relief. The reptilian had tried to bait him into revealing something specific but he hadn't fallen for it. He was about to tap his combadge to call Parker when she suddenly appeared beside him.

'Did you get it?'

'Yes.'

'What did you tell the Captain?'

'That it was for his wellbeing.'

'Good man,' she said, taking the tricorder. 'You'll get it back.'

'When?'

'Eventually.'

'That information can be extremely useful in my research to combat the virus.'

Parker shook her head. 'It won't help you, trust me.'

'How do you know so much about these people?'

'You don't want to know the answer to that question, Doctor. But even if you really did, I couldn't tell you. Too much hinges on them not knowing about me.'

'You've helped a little. Surely they'll start to figure something out.'

'Maybe they will, but hopefully by then it'll be too late for them.'

Chapter Eleven

Starfleet Headquarters San Francisco, Earth December 19, 2157

It was a historic meeting but one that would never make its way into any history books. Starfleet Command's Admiral Gardner, MACO commander General Casey and Ambassador Skon of the Vulcan Advisory Committee all sat in a tribunal with Admiral Dexe giving them evidence. After eleven hours, he had given them only the basics of the future war with the Cha'lv and already the Vulcan was looking stony.

'Admiral Dexe,' Skon began. 'What evidence do you have of this war?'

Dexe considered his answer carefully, for this would be the hardest part of his mission. 'At this moment Earth and the Coalition are at war with the Romulans, correct?'

Gardner nodded. 'What of it?'

'In three years, the Romulans will attempt to take Earth by surprise by coming through the Cheron system. You'll learn of this beforehand and send whatever ships you can spare to combat the threat. The Coalition forces will be successful and the Romulans will sign the Treaty of Cheron which ends the war. They will retreat behind a Neutral Zone for a century and in the ashes of the Coalition, a new alliance will be formed.'

'This Federation you spoke of?' Skon asked.

'Yes, Ambassador. The United Federation of Planets will stabilise this region of the galaxy for the better part of a century, until the Klingons and Romulans individually come to the conclusion that they can take on the Federation. We will succeed in fending them off and eventually both will become allies. The Federation will ally itself with the majority of the galaxy by the thirtieth century and try to fight off the Cha'lv threat.'

'But the Federation will lose?' Casey asked.

'Yes, General. By the time we realise the manpower and strength of the Cha'lv it is too late. They will have infested our galaxy to such a degree that every vessel we have in our arsenal would do nothing more than act as a nuisance fly.'

'It sounds far-fetched,' Skon stated. 'However, since arriving on Earth I have found many of my previously-held beliefs to be logically flawed. You still have not provided evidence which will convince me, however.'

Dexx smiled, knowing he had the Vulcan. 'I don't need to convince you, gentlemen. Early in the new year, Captain Archer will suggest the formation of a tactical division of Starfleet Command to specifically counter the Romulan threat. He will reveal a number of secrets to you all.'

'And?' Casey asked.

'The MACOs will join with the fleet's security officers to form Starfleet Tactical and you, General Casey, will be given a field commission of Admiral, commensurate with your rank and take a place on the Command Council. Three weeks after the formation of this new division, Captain Ramirez will stumble across an unknown vessel and the Intrepid will be heavily damaged. He'll report a reptilian was responsible and you will jump to the conclusion that the Xindi have returned.'

'It will be the Cha'lav?' Gardner asked sceptically.

'Yes, it will. The two species evolved on similar lines, evolving several phenotypes from their base genetic structure to incorporate primate, insectoid, reptilian and aquatic species, as well as others.'

'How will we know?'

'You'll compare the DNA and realise it is a different species. Lieutenant Sato of the Enterprise will be given security clearance to translate what Captain Ramirez was able to download from the alien ship before it was destroyed and she will tell you that the Cha'lav are planning to invade. Admiral Casey will form the Long-range Threat Assessment and Response Division and begin compiling a database of Cha'lav activity.'

'You seem to know a lot about what will happen,' Skon stated.

'To me, this is all ancient history. I'm here to stay, I can't go home. Stick me in a bunker and wait until these events come to pass if you don't believe me.'

Casey and Gardner looked at each other before the latter nodded. 'We'll keep you hidden, Admiral. What else can you tell us about the Cha'lav?'

'Nothing until you learn it for yourselves. I would be violating the most sacrosanct law of my time if I did otherwise.'

'I would hope that there was something that might make this war take a little less time.'

Dexx considered it for a long moment, but he was already armed with several pieces of information which might prove useful. 'You might suggest to Captain Archer that he ask General Shran for a little technological assistance in a week's time.'

'What will that accomplish?' Gardner asked.

'Shields,' Dexx answered with a smile. 'Starfleet ships will no longer solely have to rely on their hull plating.'

Casey grinned. 'A little extra boost could be useful against the Romulans. Do the MACOs get anything special?'

'Not at this time, General.'

'I believe that we have exhausted this line of questioning,' Skon stood to leave. 'Thank you for your honesty, Admiral Dexx. I trust the next time we meet it will not be under such trying circumstances.'

'Thank you, Ambassador. Please give my regards to your wife, T'Rama.'

The Ambassador raised an eyebrow. 'I suppose asking you how you know of my wife would be a waste of time?'

'Not at all, Ambassador. Your family is a revered one in Starfleet and Federation history, starting with your father, to yourself and your son, and his son as well. All serving in ambassadorial duties, some in Starfleet, and all with distinction.'

Skon inclined his head. 'Live long and prosper.'

'Peace and long life,' Dexx replied.

Once the Vulcan had left the room, the humans did likewise, leaving Dexx alone with the promise that quarters would be arranged for him. He was worried that someone from Earth would see him since first contact with the Bolians would

not occur until after the founding of the Federation, and he had to remain hidden until at least that time. Because by his time Bolians lived well into their second century, he would be able to assist Starfleet, and the Federation, in combating the Cha'lav threat for some time to come.

Chapter Twelve

USS *Pytheas*

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55274.1 (April 11, 2378)

Captain Leza Astar consoled Melex as he sat by the torpedo casing that held his late wife. He had reluctantly agreed to let Doctor Maxx perform an autopsy after learning that it would be conducted holographically, and the doctor had learned a lot about the progression of the disease, including the sequence of anatomical failures that led to death. Privately, Astar wondered whether her godson actually had the skills to deal with this viral pandemic, but he was a genius with genetics and at the moment, the galaxy's only hope of staving off a total disaster and the deaths of trillions. He had isolated the prion which the Cha'lav had created, and was already testing a number of antiviruses that he had designed himself to combat the threat.

Astar was relatively confident in her chief medical officer's ability but she wanted him to have help and the only person in the known galaxy who could give it to him was Doctor Julian Bashir, a genetically enhanced human currently stationed on *Deep Space Nine* in the Bajor sector, half a galaxy away. The information had been sent, but whether they would receive any helpful response before the situation deteriorated was anyone's guess. Astar's combadge chirped for attention and she stepped away from the grieving Denobulan.

'Astar here, go ahead.'

'Captain, I have some promising results for some of the humanoid species, but none of the antiviruses are working against High Lord Yannik. He is the leader of three hundred million people, how do I tell him that he can't go home?'

She wasn't sure she could answer that question. 'Isn't his body producing any antibodies at all?'

'The prion was designed to prevent the body fighting back. The body doesn't even realise it's been infected. The antiviruses I'm creating are tailored to each species, like the prion itself, but I'm not as good at this as the Cha'lav are. I believe I can cure most of these aliens, but High Lord Yannik is the most difficult. If I had other canine DNA I might be able to reverse engineer something.'

'Of all the species on the *Pytheas*, are there none that evolved from canines?'

'No sir, I've already thought of that.'

'What have you told him?'

'I said that if he goes home, he could wipe out his entire species.'

'Exactly like that?'

'Yes sir, I was plain with him.'

'And what was his response?'

'That I was incapable of fulfilling my duties and his personal physician would find a cure and eat me for lunch.'

Astar stifled a laugh and cleared her throat. 'Just do the best you can, Arlon. No one expects you to be perfect.'

'Sir, if I make a mistake on this one, three hundred million people die.'

'That's a defeatist attitude and I won't stand for it. What are the chances of curing the species you've developed the antiviruses for so far?'

'Eighty-three percent, but I need to get it to at least ninety-eight-point-six percent to make sure that the species will survive with minimal losses.'

'How many is minimal?'

'One in every million of any given population.'

'What survival will eighty-three percent give them?'

'Ninety-six thousand losses out of every million.'

'That's still better than them all being dead, Doctor.'

'Aye sir, but I owe it to them to make the odds as good as possible.'

Astar couldn't argue with that. 'Keep me apprised, Astar out.'

She knew that Maxx would do his very best to find a cure to the virus or

disease or whatever it was. She turned back to see Melex sobbing with his hand on his wife's coffin. He looked vulnerable but she knew that he was anything but. From the biography she'd read about the man, she knew that his father was a Federation diplomat and he had been a Starfleet officer, but resigned when his father ascended to the Federation Council. Since then he had got married and moved away from his father's influence to begin a new life and family. All that was now a moot point since his wife was dead and he was infected with a disease that could kill his father and every other Denobulan that he came into contact with.

'Captain, can your doctor cure me?'

'He's working on a solution; he'll probably be able to cure most of you.'

'What about the ones he can't cure?'

'They will have to stay isolated from the rest of their species for the rest of their lives.'

'Or until Starfleet Medical can find a cure,' he said. 'Your doctor is not infallible.'

'No, he isn't, but at the moment he is the only hope you have of being able to take her body back to Denobula Triaxa.'

Melex nodded in silent rebuke. 'I meant no offence, Captain, but I'm not used to being in a situation where I am not in control.'

'As the captain of a starship, I feel like that all the time. I have to rely on my crew to do their jobs and not micromanage everything. They know what they're doing and I have to respect that if I want anything done.'

'I'm glad I didn't go on the command track.'

Astar smiled. 'You could have done, Melex. Several tutors at the Academy, and a number of your department heads and commanding officers believed that you were command material.'

'I left Starfleet, and my father, so I could begin a new life. I don't agree with my species' polygamy, which was why my father was always interfering in my life. Once I realised that I had found the right person in Ellan I told my father what was happening and he accepted my decision. To make sure he couldn't

interfere, I left.'

'It was our loss, Melex.'

The Denobulan nodded mutely. 'Maybe it was, but look what happened. Maybe my father was right.'

Astar hated to disparage anyone's parentage, but she felt that he needed to hear some encouragement. 'Your father may have been right, or wrong, but you took your own path and he should have accepted that. What has happened is not your fault, not the fault of anyone but the Cha'lav.'

Melex smiled wanly and stood up, leaving his wife's coffin unattended. 'Thank you, Captain, but I would like to be alone now if you don't mind. I need to do some thinking.'

'Of course,' she replied and exited the cargo bay ahead of him.

Chapter Thirteen

USS Pytheas

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55274.2 (April 11, 2378)

Melex went toward his guest quarters and she headed for sickbay, intending to have more of a chat with her godson regarding his work on curing the majority of the species on board the ship.

'Captain Astar to the bridge please,' Wright suddenly barked over the comm as the ship went to red alert status.

'I'm on my way, Commander, what is going on?'

'High Lord Yannik just released a dozen escape pods and jumped to warp.'

'Where the hell is he going?'

'Home.'

The word hung in the air as Astar rode the turbolift to the bridge. *'Astar to Maxx, please tell me you found a cure for High Lord Yannik?'*

'Sorry, Captain, I'm still working on his blood work. Why do you ask?'

'He just went to warp, heading home.'

Astar winced as Maxx let out a string of Bolian curses he should have been too young to know. *'Captain, we have to stop him. His people won't have any defence against this virus. They'll all die within a matter of days or weeks.'*

'We will, you have my word,' Astar replied and then tapped her combadge again. *'Wright, beam the escape pods into the shuttlebays, cargo bays and anywhere you can find space, and then go to maximum warp. We have to catch that ship.'*

'Already on it, sir,' Wright replied. *'Bringing the last of them aboard now.'*

'Have security personnel escort them all to sickbay, and seal off the deck.'

'Aye sir, Wright out.'

Astar felt the ship jump to warp as the turbolift deposited her on the bridge. 'Did we have any of our people over there?'

'No sir, only the alien species, all of which are now aboard our ship.'

Astar muttered a curse of her own. 'Estimated time to intercept?' she asked Larson at the helm.

He looked back at her with an expression that bordered on the terrifying. 'I don't know what speed that ship is capable of, sir, but we're not catching them. We're actually losing distance. They've increased their speed to warp 9.995 and increasing.'

'Astar to engineering. Xeris, I need everything you can get out of those engines, and more.'

'Captain, we're already at maximum.'

Astar was in no mood to mollycoddle this particular officer. 'I chose you as my chief engineer because I know you can do the impossible. Get us as close to transwarp as you can. We need to catch Yannik's ship before he reaches his homeworld and wipes out his species.'

'On it, Captain, Xeris out.'

'Gonzales, get me Commander Dhrex, priority one.'

The *Pytheas* began to shake as the engines went into overdrive.

'I have the Commander for you, sir.'

'Commander, how close are you to Resoto Prime?'

'About sixteen hours, why?' Dhrex asked.

'Yannik is infected and he's heading home, it's doubtful that we'll be able to catch him before he beams down and wipes out his entire species.'

'Maximum warp, Ensign sh'Felen, now! We'll do the best we can, Captain, Dhrex out.'

Astar sank back into her chair.

'We couldn't have foreseen this,' Wright said.

'We should have done,' she replied. 'You have the conn, Commander. I'll be in my ready room, trying to get Commander Logan to give us some help.'

'Aye sir.'

Astar entered her ready room and collapsed into the chair behind her desk. The *Pytheas* was shaking fiercely and she knew that they wouldn't be able to keep up those speeds indefinitely. In fact, she knew it was more than likely that they would tear the nacelles from their struts if they continued at this speed, whatever it was.

'*What can I do for you, Captain?*' Commander Logan asked moments later.

'High Lord Yannik has stolen the Cha'lav ship and is using its speed to return home. It's unlikely that anyone will be able to catch him before he reaches Resoto Prime.'

'*The Weisskopf?*'

'Already en route, but even they are sixteen hours away.'

'*I'll contact everyone we have in the region who might be inclined to assist us, Captain, but I'm not sure there's anything we can do except mitigate the damage.*'

'That is what I thought, sir, but I had to ask.'

Logan nodded his head in sympathy. '*Not the way you wanted your first command to go, is it?*'

'Not in the least, sir. But at least sitting in this chair I have the chance to make a difference.'

'*You sound like Captain Picard.*'

'I'll take that as a compliment,' Astar smiled wanly.

'*When was the last time you got any sleep?*'

'About two days ago, I'm feeling better than I look.'

'I hope so, because you look like hell, sir.'

'You don't have to call me sir, Commander. As sector commander you're my superior officer, in billet if not in rank.'

'You flatter me, Captain, but I will still refer to you as "sir." It keeps the chain of command in place,' Logan replied with a smile.

'Will you call everyone you can?' Astar asked, desperate. 'I don't want to be responsible for three hundred million deaths.'

'I'll alert the Resoto military, and have whoever I can help out. The Ynelavii Cooperative might be of more assistance. I'll see what I can do. You'd better get some sleep, Captain. When you arrive, you're likely to have a major disaster on your hands, whatever happens.'

'Thank you, Commander; Astar out.'

She leaned back and stared out at the stars. During her conversation, the shaking had subsided and since she hadn't been informed that they were slowing down, she assumed that Xeris had somehow managed to increase the stability of the structural integrity field. The ship was almost twenty hours away, but that might as well have been a sector away for all the good it would do them. She would much prefer to have the slipstream drive but Starfleet were still playing about with that piece of technology, trying to get it work.

It was going to be a long day.

Chapter Fourteen

Starbase 535

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55274.3 (April 11, 2378)

Commander Lionel Logan stared at the blank screen. From what he knew about Captain Astar, he was sure that she was not the sort of person to cry wolf. He entered a sequence of commands and within seconds a Starfleet officer appeared on the screen. He had blond hair, blue eyes and wore the uniform of a Commander, but he had never served as anything more than a second officer on a starship. Now, he had a high security clearance and worked in an altogether different branch of Starfleet.

'This had better be important, Lionel.'

'Martin, I wouldn't have called you if it wasn't,' Logan replied. 'I've just received word that one of the infected people is heading home on an alien starship that is faster than both of ours. I really need some help out here. Two medium-sized ships with standard weaponry just isn't going to cut it against this enemy.'

'I'm sorry, but you know what President Satie has said as well as I do. She wants a more insular, bare bones fleet right now. You're lucky you've got two ships of the line out there. One starbase has an old NX-class starship protecting it.'

'I need more,' Logan said. 'Where are you, anyway? You're not in your office.'

'That's right, I'm not. I'll be arriving in less than half an hour to take control of Operation Cobalt. Admiral Ranar has given me full authority in this matter, Commander.'

'I don't doubt it, but what exactly am I going to do? Run the colonies?'

'No, your task will be to fast-track Kursica's entry into the Federation and make sure the colonies are safe from the natives. If any mission hints at Cha'lav involvement, it passes to me, as your new executive officer.'

'Lieutenant Commander Osden is quite capable as my first officer.'

Madden grinned. *'He isn't a suitable first officer for a Captain.'*

It took a moment for the comment to sink in. 'I'm getting a promotion?' Logan asked without emotion.

'Against my recommendation, but Admiral Ranar believed that the situation warranted it.'

'Well thanks, Commander. It's nice to know you have my best interests at heart.'

'You should have stayed an engineer, you're better with machines than people.'

'You're one to talk. Where is Osden being assigned?'

'He'll take my shuttlecraft back to Earth and be assigned to one of the new Defiant-class ships as first officer.'

'That should please him. He's been moaning about starbase duty for a while.'

'I'll be there in a few minutes, Commander. Please meet me in the shuttlebay, Madden out.'

'Commander, there's a shuttle approaching,' Osden called from Operations.

'Send it to landing bay seven. I'll meet the occupant there, Logan out.'

Logan hurried from his office toward the turbolift and noticed Aulyffke approaching him again. 'I don't have time right now, Ambassador.'

'You are here to expedite our entry into the Federation, Commander. I would think that I would be the most important person for you to spend time with.'

'Normally, I would agree, but I have a number of things going on at the moment that, quite frankly, are more important than your entry into the Federation.'

Aulyffke followed him into the turbolift. 'You may be right, but unless you stop this disagreement from devolving into civil war, there might not be a Kursica to gain entry into the Federation.'

'I have been keeping an eye on the arguments, Aulyffke, and it isn't as bad as you're making it out to be. Your new government needs to take a softer hand in the negotiations. You know that I can't interfere with internal matters.'

Now, if you'll excuse me I have a problem to deal with.'

'As you wish,' the Kursican replied and stayed in the turbolift as Logan stepped out.

Logan stopped in his tracks as he turned the corner. Standing by the door to the landing bay was a man who didn't look imposing but gave the impression of boyish charm. It was only an impression though, the man was a hard person to please.

'Welcome aboard *Starbase 535*, Commander.'

'Thank you, Commander. I'd like to be fully briefed on the current situation.'

'Everything you have is everything I have. I sent the last databurst to the Admiral, a few hours ago. The only current concern is High Lord Yannik.'

'Explain.'

'He's stolen the Cha'lav vessel and is en route to his homeworld, believing that his own doctor can cure him.'

'He must be stopped.'

'We have everything possible chasing him, but nothing we have is fast enough.'

Madden sighed. 'That's why you wanted something faster.'

'Yes,' Logan replied.

'You'd better give me a fuller briefing on this little hiccough. Admiral Ranar is not going to like the situation one little bit.'

'And as his lapdog you'll express his displeasure.'

'That was out of line, Lionel,' Madden said sourly.

'I don't appreciate having the rug pulled out from under me. If I was given full disclosure from the outset, I might have been able to get what pieces I do have in better places,' Logan replied. 'Since you joined Starfleet Tactical, you've become less of a human being. You used to remember what it was like to be

out here.'

'I still do, but now I have the bigger picture to worry about. While you're worrying about which order the colonies should be in for supply runs, I have to juggle hundreds of personnel in dozens of sectors to make sure that we have our ears open for any potential threat.'

'So why were you assigned here, seems like a step backwards.'

'I know more about the situation than you do, Commander. I'd like to arrange a little party at oh nine hundred hours for your promotion.'

'I'll see to it.'

'Good, now if you wouldn't mind showing me to some quarters, I think I need a little shut-eye. The shuttlecraft was a little cramped.'

Chapter Fifteen

USS *Weisskopf*

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55275.9 (April 11, 2378)

Commander Dhrex held on to his chair as the ship shook around him. The *Nova*-class starships had a maximum speed of warp eight, but modifications made to some during the war had pushed that up to an impressive eight point eight; though the ship's superstructure hadn't received the necessary upgrades in response. He was closer to Resoto Prime by a few light-years, but even with the extra speed he had at his disposal he didn't think he'd make it in time, and he doubted that the *Pytheas* would either.

'Where's Murdoch? I thought he'd be complaining by now.'

'He elected to remain on DN-646 to assist with the repairs, said he needed something to do,' Banks answered.

'What about Marshall?'

'He also stayed behind sir, refused to leave until he figured out how the antimatter caused the damage.'

'How many people did we actually leave on that lump of ore?'

'Six, sir, two more scientists and two security personnel.'

'Inform them that we'll return as soon as we're able.'

'Aye sir.'

The *Weisskopf* shuddered more violently than it had in the last fourteen hours and the lights dimmed to minimum, without returning to normal levels after several moments.

'Dhrex to engineering, what the hell is happening down there?'

'I'm shutting down as much as possible to provide extra power for the structural integrity field. If I don't the only thing that will make it to Resoto will be debris,' Lieutenant Cain Johnson replied testily.

'You could have warned me,' Dhrex shot back.

'You would have said no and we would have had an argument.'

'Point taken, Lieutenant. Is there anything else we can do to get more speed?'

'No sir, we're at warp eight-point-nine-three now, and pieces of the outer hull are flaking off.'

Dhrex sighed. 'Estimated time to intercept?'

Sh'Felen turned to look at him. 'We're not going to make it, sir. I have the alien vessel on long range sensors, and they will reach Resoto two hours before us.'

'Contact the *Pytheas* and inform Captain Astar that we're too far away and have to slow down.'

'Aye sir,' Banks replied. 'Is there nothing we can do to stop them?'

Dhrex considered the question. 'Would Ynelavii weapons be any use against that ship?'

'No sir, ours might only just be enough.'

'Then the answer is no, there's nothing we can do except damage control when we arrive. Sh'Felen, slow to warp-eight-point-five, and tell me how late we'll be.'

'Eight point five, aye sir. We'll arrive at Resoto three point two hours later than High Lord Yannik.'

'He could infect hundreds of people in that time,' Dhrex murmured. 'Get Regent Dolan for me, I want to ask him for a favour.'

'On screen.'

'I'm Regent Dolan, leader of the Ynelavii Cooperative. How can I help you?'

'I am Commander Dhrex of the Federation starship *Weisskopf*.'

'How can I help you, Commander?'

'There is an alien vessel approaching the Resoto system. The same one that

attacked before. However, it is now under the command of High Lord Yannik and he has been infected with a disease that will kill his entire species. I would like to ask your ships to prevent him reaching Resoto Prime by any means necessary.'

Dolan smiled wanly. *'While I have no love for the Resoto, I am a scientist and harming life goes against every tenet I hold dear. I will try to prevent him reaching his planet, but my vessels are likely to be attacked if the Resoto realise that the High Lord is aboard that vessel.'*

'Can you ask them to assist you? We'll provide all the evidence you need.'

Dolan nodded. *'This will cause some problems, Commander. I have also not heard from the warship I sent to look for the vessel.'*

'The *Oxelus* is returning at best speed, Regent. I hope to explain everything when the situation has been resolved.'

'Thank you, Commander. I will order my ships to the Resoto system immediately. They should arrive within two hours.'

'Thank you, Regent, Dhrex out.'

'It'll be close, sir.'

'We may be causing a war by doing this, but if it works we'll save millions.'

'Captain Astar wishes to speak with you, sir,' Banks said.

'Put her through.'

'Commander, what's going on?'

'I've asked the Ynelavii to help us as they are closer. How far behind you is the *Oxelus*?'

'About an hour behind,' Astar answered. 'I take it you are aware of the hostility between these two races?'

'Yes ma'am, but allowing three hundred million people to die without doing something to save them is not something I can live with.'

Astar nodded. *'Let's hope that they can get there in time.'*

'It will be close, Captain.'

'Very well, you'll be there about three hours before us, Commander. If there is any chance of stopping the spread of this thing, I want you to do everything you can, even if it means vaporising part of the crust.'

'Captain?'

'If a few million who might be infected have to die to prevent tens of millions dying, then it has to be done. This is a numbers thing, Commander. We won't have any choice in the matter if we want to save those people.'

'Aye sir.'

'I'll be in touch, Astar out.'

'Just what I needed,' Dhrex muttered. *'Ensign, punch it up to maximum warp again. I want to make sure that we don't have to kill any of them ourselves.'*

'Aye sir, warp eight-point-eight.'

'Time to intercept?'

'Two point one hours later than the alien vessel.'

Dhrex sighed. Maybe Astar was right and he would have to kill a few million. He knew in his head that it was the right thing to do, but that didn't make it any easier for his morals to swallow.

Chapter Sixteen

USS Pytheas

Resoto Prime

Stardate 55276.5 (April 11, 2378)

"Captain's log, supplemental; we have arrived in orbit of the Resoto homeworld to find a devastating sight. Debris litters the planet's high orbit and evidence suggests both Ynelavii and Resoto vessels have been destroyed in significant numbers. Commander Dhrex and his security teams aboard the Weisskopf have confirmed that the Cha'lav vessel, dubbed Guxendur, under High Lord Yannik's command, was responsible for the destruction of the combined fleet.

"Of a far greater import is the news from the surface that a number of people in the capital city have come down with a virus that resembles the Resoto influenza virus, albeit an extremely fatal strain. At least three thousand people are known to have died in the last three hours and tens of thousands more are sick.

"Doctor Maxx has asked to take a full medical complement down to the surface and I have reluctantly denied his request, even though it is likely that none of his personnel would be infected. I cannot sanction such a mission but I am fully aware that my lack of action will result in the total destruction of an entire civilisation."

'Captain, incoming transmission from Starbase 535, it's Captain Logan,' Lieutenant Talen called from the ops station.

'I'll take it in my ready room,' Astar replied and headed off the bridge.

'Aye sir,' Wright muttered and moved to take the centre chair.

Astar knew what was coming and braced herself for the inevitable argument she would have with the former Enterprise chief engineer.

'You denied his request?'

Astar leaned forward in her chair. 'Yes sir, I denied his request. Even with the full resources of my security forces at their disposal, Maxx and the other medical personnel would be completely outnumbered.'

'So you're placing your crew's safety above that of a dying population?' Logan

asked, distaste colouring his tone.

'Commander Dhrex refused to vaporise the capital city on my orders. It may have killed millions but it would have saved the populace. That is no longer possible since the outbreak has spread across the continent. Thousands are being infected every minute and hundreds are dying. Maxx no longer believes he can devise a cure, which is why he advised High Lord Yannik not to return home.'

Logan nodded. '*Commander Dhrex has issued a formal complaint against you, Captain.*'

'Let me guess, he cited a violation of the Prime Directive?'

'Correct,' Logan replied.

'I did not violate the Prime Directive, Captain.' I was providing humanitarian aid to those in distress. I should cite him for disobeying a direct order from a superior officer.'

'*General Order 24 was superseded by the Eminiar Amendment.*'

'I did not ask him to obliterate the planet, sir. I asked him to contain the virus by eliminating its immediate breeding ground, and in this case it was the capital city.'

'*Semantics, Captain Astar.*'

'What is not in dispute is that the majority of the Ynelavii fleet and the entirety of the Resoto fleet has been destroyed. The Cha'lav have destabilised the political structure of this section of the galaxy and the Resoto are dying. The worst part is that there is nothing I or anyone else can do for them now. The planet should be quarantined under General Order Seven.'

'*I don't think that's still on the books either,*' Logan replied.

'Then call Command and check,' Astar told him. 'Regent Dolan, the new head of the Ynelavii Cooperative, has asked for a Federation representative to begin a petition for their entry into the Federation. How's it going with the Kursicans?'

Logan sighed at her change of subject but knew that as her equal he didn't

have the authority to do anything to her. He decided that she should be reprimanded, and as sector commander he had that authority. *'They won't be ready any time soon, but the Ynelavii might, how far is Ynelav from here?'*

'Six light years; I hope you're not thinking of moving that station.'

'It wouldn't even make it out of orbit, Captain. To the subject at hand, I'm ordering you to send your doctor down there to try and find a cure.'

Astar narrowed her eyes and set her jaw. 'I officially protest that order and refuse to comply. You can bring me up on whatever charges you like, Captain, but Resoto is a dead world. It's time that we left it well enough alone and got on with the mission.'

'Which mission would that be, Captain? Learning more about the Cha'lav or exploring the sector?'

'Both, Captain. Astar out.'

As the screen blanked, Astar leaned back in her chair and sighed. She may have just ended her career, but she believed she was in the right and would gladly face a discharge if they ordered her to send Arlon or any officer down to that planet.

'Captain, we're receiving a hail from the Weisskopf.'

'Patch it through, Commander.'

'Captain, I've been ordered to Ynelav IV to meet with Regent Dolan regarding their petition for Federation membership, do you need me for anything else?'

'No, thank you, Commander. I believe we can handle it from here. Good luck.'

'Thank you, sir; Dhrex out.'

She returned to the bridge to see Wright pacing as a number of images were on the viewscreen, each showing Resoto cities and the panic that was ensuing as large numbers of them looted, pillaged or just died in the streets.

'Why are we watching this?' she asked her exec.

'We're watching the results of your orders, Captain,' Wright answered.

'Thousands are dying every hour now that the virus has reached the general population.'

'Commander, my ready room, now.'

'No sir,' Wright turned on her. 'Whatever you have to say, you can say it here, where everyone can hear.'

Astar tugged her uniform down and straightened up. 'Fine, then listen, all of you. The Cha'lav killed the Resoto, not us. We could spend the next week down there trying to find a cure until the streets are littered with the dead, until there are no more Resoto. Doctor Maxx does not think he can find a cure for them, not with their canine DNA, because he has nothing to go on, no data from which to work.'

Chapter Seventeen

USS Pytheas

Resoto Prime

Stardate 55276.6 (April 11, 2378)

There was silence on the bridge as they took in what she was saying.

She continued. 'He still wants to go down there even though the odds of finding a cure are so slim that a Vulcan would have trouble quantifying it. I think our time would be better spent on finding that Cha'lav vessel and pulling it apart. I think we should learn as much as we can about the Cha'lav so that we can stop them doing whatever it is they have come to do and make sure that we send them back.'

A smile tugged at Wright's lips as he turned to Gonzales. 'You heard the Captain, let's get moving. Scan the planets and moons on this system until you find something, I doubt that the Cha'lav's transporters are that much better than ours otherwise they wouldn't need that nice little gateway.'

'Captain, can you come down here,' Maxx called from sickbay.

'I'm on my way, Doctor. Wright, you have the conn.'

Astar wondered what the doctor had called her about as the last time they spoke he was still working on cures for as many species as possible. She reached sickbay in less than two minutes and found security posted inside and outside.

'What's the problem, Arlon?'

'I've completed my preliminary work on the canine DNA of the Resoto, and I know why I won't be able to find a cure.'

'I'm listening.'

'The Resoto did not evolve naturally from canines into humanoids. They were engineered at some point in the distant past. I doubt any of their records even hints at that. The reason I can't find a cure is because they don't have the thymus gland, common to all vertebrate animals across the galaxy. Without it, I can't manufacture an antibody because their bodies don't produce them. Whatever the Cha'lav did to make this virus work, they did a good job. There's

no way I can reverse it before the entire population is wiped out, I don't even know if I could do it with all of Starfleet Medical helping.'

Astar listened with growing dread. 'I want you to put all of that into your report and sent it to Commander Logan at *Starbase 535* immediately.'

'I'll do it now, are you all right, Leza?'

Astar smiled. 'I'm fine, Arlon. Just a little tired.'

Maxx nodded and turned back to his console. Astar shook her head at her doctor's non-response and returned to the bridge where Wright was still trying to find the alien ship.

'Captain on the bridge!' Gonzales yelled as the turbolift doors opened.

'I'm not a fan of that particular regulation, Commander,' Astar replied. 'Please discontinue it.'

'Aye sir,' the tactical officer said.

'Any luck, Commander?' Astar asked her executive officer.

He shook his head. 'No sir, we're not picking up anything at all.'

She narrowed her eyes at the viewscreen and then turned to Gonzales again. 'Commander, you said that the hull of that ship was made of something that our sensors couldn't penetrate.'

'That's right, sir.'

'Then why don't we use the astrometrics laboratory to look for something that we can't see?'

Gonzales sighed. 'Of course, wide-band active scans across the entire system should be able to detect everything, and what appears as a hole in the readings will be the ship.'

'Captain, we cannot scan the entire system at once, it would need to be conducted in sections,' Wright replied.

Astar smiled. 'Technology has moved on a little, Commander. Gonzales,

initialise and launch the Sensor Probe Reconnaissance Array.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales replied and her fingers flew across the console.

Just below the secondary deflector dish, a section of the hull retracted and five class-9 probe cases emerged, spreading out and engaging micro-impulse engines. The SPRA sensor network was designed to augment the upgraded astrometrics lab and provide total sensor coverage of a given at the same time, making it difficult for anything to hide, especially an alien ship whose crew had no idea that anyone was looking for them.

'It will take approximately twelve minutes for the probes to reach their optimum scanning range,' Lieutenant Mahtani said.

'Lieutenant?'

'Gonzales called me to the bridge, sir. I designed the SPRA network with Doctor Nathan Bridger before he died.'

'Doctor Bridger?'

'Yes sir. His ancestor developed the Wireless Sea Knowledge Retrieval Satellites, or "Whiskers," that a number of submersible vehicles used in the second decade of the twenty-first century.'

Astar shook her head in bewilderment. She knew all about the supposed happenings of the short-lived political entity known as the United Earth Oceans and some historians believed that the Macronesian Alliance was the precursor to the Eastern Coalition.

'Is that historical fact, Lieutenant, or the ravings of a deluded man?' Wright asked. 'Bridger was known for his flights of fancy.'

'Like Doctor Cochrane and his crazy story about cybernetic creatures from the future who tried to stop the launch of the *Phoenix*, sir?' Mahtani asked.

'He has a point there, Commander,' Astar smiled at the scowl her first officer exhibited. 'However it came about, the SPRA network is a prototype sensor system that Starfleet Research and Development asked that we test out. There are more than forty ships exploring the galaxy that are serving as test-beds for new technology before they are rolled out across the fleet.'

'I'm aware of that, sir.'

'Commander, I want you to coordinate the search for the Cha'lav vessel while I have another word with Commander Logan and try to keep this mess in perspective.'

'Aye sir,' Wright replied as Astar entered her ready room. 'How long before the probes are in position?'

'Three minutes, sir.'

'Excellent, prepare for a full-system scan, maximum power.'

'That will deplete our reserves significantly, sir,' Mahtani said.

'The warp core can handle what we need, Lieutenant.'

'Aye sir,' Mahtani replied and turned to the science console to relay orders to engineering.

Chapter Eighteen

Science Ministry

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55276.7 (April 11, 2378)

After the activity of the last few hours, Regent Dolan was convinced that the rebellion was not just the few dozen malcontents which First Prime Gexin had been sprouting for months but a well organised, heavily armed, and densely populated movement. Colonel Rokan had remained behind to coordinate the search for the rebels and was now caught in their net. He'd disappeared and no one had seen him for some time.

The two people, besides himself, who were the highest ranked in their respective fields and ran different areas of Ynelavii life were now in the room with him. Seated to his right was the current head of the planet's mainstream and only official clergy, High Adept Qalas, and the leader of the armed forces and Militia Elite, General Allak. Allak had only just returned from chasing the alien craft and his tale of the devastation that greeted him when he reached Resoto was terrible, but he knew he must get back to thinking about his own planet's problems.

'General, Colonel Rokan has disappeared and the last time he saw First Prime Gexin, she was alive. His report stated that he left her with medics but I've seen no evidence of that. The only medics in the area were outside.'

'With all due respect, Regent, don't you think that it's possible the "medics" he saw were rebels and they killed Gexin once Rokan left to try to deal with the rebels? This government has suffered a major attack and a full three quarters have been killed. The people are calling for blood, and at this point whether it is ours or the rebels' probably doesn't matter all that much. The only way to find out what really happened is to capture the rebel leaders and interrogate them.'

'Without torture,' Dolan cautioned.

'Now is not the time to play it safe, sir.'

'Now is the best time to play it safe. We will not become primitives just because a group of malcontents have dealt us a crippling blow. Find the rebel leaders and interrogate them. Find Colonel Rokan and then perhaps we'll learn what really happened to the First Prime. Colonel Ferok can take over

the day-to-day running of the Militia. I want this to be your top priority.'

Allak nodded, scratching his beard. 'I'll get on it right away, Regent. If you'll forgive my hurried exit, Adept,' he added and touched a control on his wrist. He vanished in a pillar of light.

'The youth today are always in a rush,' Qalas muttered.

'Adept, please, no more of your rhetoric. I asked you here to seek your advice on the state of the people's faith. I know that to be an effective leader I must look after their spiritual wellbeing as well as their mental and physical wellbeing and that of society.'

'The people's faith is under my jurisdiction, Regent,' Qalas said plainly. 'And since you are not a believer, I don't think that you have a right to undertake the responsibility.'

'That is precisely what I want to discuss with you. The people's faith is fractured, and I think that to unite them I must know that faith. I want you to teach me.'

Qalas chuckled. 'I cannot teach you if you do not truly believe. Besides, only the Seer can unite the people.'

'The Seer?' Dolan asked, slightly incredulously.

Qalas frowned. 'If you were at all familiar with religious doctrine, you would know that the Seer was chosen by the Prophet Yotanu in the First Age to lead our people into the Second Age. The scripture is clear on the matter. "In every Age there is a chosen one. A Seer will emerge from the darkest days of the Twilight to lead the people into a new Dawn." The first lines of the Seer Scrolls, the most ancient teachings we have.'

'I thought you were of the Nelanii sect?'

'I am, but I am also of the belief that the Seer sect and the Nelanii sect are merely a divergence of a viewpoint.'

Dolan sighed. 'Is there any way to recognise the Seer?'

Qalas knitted his brows in thought. His features were pale from spending thousands of hours in the shrine outside the city, out of the sunlight. 'The Seer

will be able to read the Seer Scrolls. All we are working from is a translation made thousands of years ago, but the Seer will be able to read the original text.'

'But how do we know who the Seer is? How will we recognise him?'

'I don't know. The Lesser Scrolls only advise us that the Seer will provide guidance and he will emerge in a dark time.'

'I don't want to imagine a time darker than what we face now. I think it's time I immersed myself in the teachings of Yotanu so that I might in fact be able to recognise the Seer when he comes.'

'Am I converting you, Regent?'

Dolan favoured the priest with a wry smile. 'Let's just say that I'm discovering a scientific curiosity about the religious aspect of the people I must now lead.'

'It is a start.'

'Thank you, Adept. Since I'm new at this, could you please try to explain to me in as secular a manner as possible what exactly the religion brings to the people.'

Qalas considered his next words carefully. 'Everyone needs to believe in something bigger than themselves. For you, that belief manifests itself as a belief in science. For others, it is belief in a Prophet, a man from the past who supposedly heard the words of God.'

'Supposedly?'

'I do not believe blindly, Regent; I read the scripture and interpret it as best I can. Our language has evolved since then and many words written then do not have the same meanings today.'

'So your faith is as much scientific as religious?'

'I suppose you could interpret it that way,' the Adept said diplomatically. While Dolan was essentially correct, it was not nice to hear it said so plainly, though the priest knew that he meant no malice by it. He was expressing his faith the only way he knew how, through science.

Chapter Nineteen

Science Ministry

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55276.8 (April 12, 2378)

'I understand the need for people to believe in something more, but how does religion satisfy that need.'

'It gives them something to cling to when things go wrong.'

'So they can take comfort in the fact that God is always there to protect them and give them help?'

'Something like that, yes.'

Dolan shook his head. 'At least now I understand why some of the more fervent religious people in the city spout so much rhetoric.'

'They're not always trying to convert people.'

'But they often become violent when confronted with alternative viewpoints.'

Qalas shrugged. 'Unfortunately.'

'I believe that the rebels are an ultra-aggressive faction, Adept. There is evidence to suggest that they believe in a literal interpretation of the scripture, not taking into account the fact that the language has changed.'

'How are they organised?'

'Into cells, like any good terrorist network.'

'But they don't consider themselves terrorists.'

'Of course not, they consider themselves saviours.'

'Hmmm. I don't suppose you know who their leaders are?'

'We haven't been able to ascertain that yet, no, but we do have suspicions,' Dolan replied and noticed that Qalas was on the verge of saying something. 'Do you know who they might be?'

'I cannot break my vows, Regent,' the priest finally said with reluctance.

Dolan's visage darkened with immediate rage. 'Your First Prime is dead, most of the government have been killed or maimed, and the government headquarters has been destroyed. Now you tell me that you know who at least one of the rebel leaders are, but can't tell me who? What happened to your sense of duty?'

Qalas trembled with rage, but he spoke in measured tones. 'My duty is to the people. I cannot reveal what was said to me in the sanctity of the Confession.'

'Adept, the rebels represent a danger to us all. Whether they are religious zealots or simply people with grievances, they are far too well armed to be ignored. Key government employees were involved in this attack and we must discover who they are, and who the rebels are, if we are to return to our normal way of life.'

'That will never happen, Regent. Our normal way of life was fighting the Resoto. The Resoto are dying and we have no one left to fight. In times past, before we were united, that meant internecine squabbling and civil war. Your duty must be to prevent that from happening.'

'If that is indeed the case, Adept, then I must know who the rebel leaders are. If I can stop them from causing any more attacks, I may be able to bring them into the fold and stop a civil war before it starts.' There was a knock at the door. 'Come in.'

'Regent, I'm afraid new measures need to be put in place.'

'Is there a problem, General?'

Allak nodded and his expression was grave. 'I'm afraid that Minister Furan has left the building and admitted to the people that he is the leader of the rebellion. He is declaring the Navalo region a haven for the disenfranchised.'

'What?' Dolan jumped up in anger.

Allak swallowed. 'Furan has rallied a number of people to his cause, Regent. They are travelling to Navalo as we speak, where Furan tells them that they can live without fear of attack from the government. He is calling it the last free city on Ynelav.'

Dolan narrowed his eyes at the priest. 'Is Furan the only rebel leader?'

'I cannot reveal that information.'

'Fine, then you will be arrested for treason. General, I want a proclamation sent out to all areas. All religious gatherings are suspended until further notice. I assume you have been keeping tabs on rebel strongholds?'

'Of course, Regent; but we don't have the evidence to bring them in for questioning.'

'I'm declaring a state of emergency, and suspending the Rules of Detention. Arrest any rebel you find and interrogate them. I want to know exactly what is so special about the Navalo region and what Furan has done to prevent our interference, if anything.'

'Yes sir,' Allak replied, turned on his heel, and left.

'I will take my leave of you, Regent,' Qalas said, standing.

'You're still under arrest.'

'On what charge?'

'Treason,' Dolan reiterated. 'By refusing to reveal the identity of an enemy combatant, you become one.'

'I don't recall that in the Ynelavii Legal Charter.'

'You should read the Amendments more often, Adept. The Seventeenth Amendment states in states of emergency and war, certain legal traditions will be suspended to limit bloodshed. It goes on to list those traditions, and among them are the Rules of Detention and its associated Writs.'

'You are committing a grave act by arresting me, Regent. The people will never forgive you.'

Dolan smiled. 'You revealed to me that you believe in the Seer scrolls, Adept. The people have always ascertained that the Seer sect is false. You have fallen from grace. I, on the other hand, have suddenly developed an interest in uniting the people under this secular banner.'

'You'll never succeed, Regent. The people will resist change.'

'When I unveil the Seer, and get an actual translation of the Seer scrolls, you will see that the people will accept change. Resistance to new ideas always happens, but the strong ideas will prevail, and I will keep you in prison long enough to see that change happen.'

'The people will destroy you, and this civilisation will fall before the Seer is found,' the Adept replied. 'Remember, Regent, the Seer will emerge from the Twilight. We have not yet reached that, and we may never reach that stage if the people resist change. Change caused the fall of the last Age of Civilisation.'

Chapter Twenty

Resoto vessel *Guxendur*

Resoto system

Stardate 55276.9 (April 12, 2378)

'High Lord Yannik, this is Captain Astar of the Federation starship Pytheas. Please respond.'

'I can hear you, Captain. What do you want?' High Lord Yannik asked as he prowled the corridors of his new ship seeking out a single member of his species who was still alive.

In under a day, all the military, government and medical personnel he'd invited aboard had been afflicted by this virus that the Starfleet doctor said he couldn't cure. Hours later, the first of them had started dying and he knew that the doctor had been correct. Only one person had returned to the planet below and now his people were dying by the thousands. He had doomed the Resoto. Only those living off-world were spared, and they were few and far between. He had even ordered the destruction of his own ships when they prevented him getting home, more needless killing. There was no one alive on this ship. Even the medical personnel who had secreted themselves in the isolation wards were dying, when they shouldn't have been infected. It was too late.

'I will be destroying your ship if you do not surrender it immediately.'

'My people are dead, by my hand, Captain. You can have this ship if you want it. I'm venting all areas to the vacuum of space. In my last act, I will kill myself and this virus.'

'There is no need to commit suicide, Yannik.'

'I cannot be cured and I will not infect the remaining off-world Resoto with this plague. Let me do this, Captain. I implore you.'

'As you wish,' Astar replied reluctantly. *'We will remain here until the vessel has been...cleansed.'*

'Thank you, Captain, Yannik out.'

At least he would now be able to die with what little dignity he had left.

Returning to the bridge, Yannik opened all the bulkhead doors and then the airlocks. He felt himself pulled through the corridors of the ship, bouncing off bulkheads until he mercifully lost consciousness.

Yannik slipped out of the ship by the port airlock on the top deck and floated away. The airlocks suddenly clicked back into place and the bulkhead doors closed, returning the ship to its previous state. A single sensor came online and detected no lifesigns aboard. That activated a number of dormant and rarely used subroutines which in turn initialised a preset computer programme.

The ship's engines started up and it began to move under its own power, headed for a region in the sector devoid of stars. Moments later, five people beamed over to the bridge from the *Pytheas* in EV suits and began to power down all the systems. The ship, sensing that its last-resort programme had been interrupted, sent out a distress call.

'Xeris to *Pytheas*,' the chief engineer said.

'Go ahead, Commander,' Astar replied, sensing trouble.

'We've powered down all the systems, but I think the ship might have sent out a homing beacon or distress call of some kind.'

'Stand by.'

'Sir, all sections of this vessel have been repressurised,' Maxx stated. 'It is safe to take off the suits.'

'If you don't mind, Doctor, I'll keep mine on. I have no intention of letting a virus of any kind enter my system from this vessel.'

'Xeris, Talen detected it over here as well. Download the database and get off there. Set it to self-destruct. We can't let it reach back home.'

'I don't know if that's even possible, sir,' the chief engineer replied. 'This vessel has a sophisticated artificial intelligence, much like Romulan vessels do. I'm not sure I could set the self-destruct before it realised what I was doing and stopped me from doing it.'

'Stop talking about it and attempt it.'

'Aye sir, downloading Cha'lav database to secure section of the computer core now.'

'We're getting it, Commander,' the Andorian replied from ops.

Xeris ignored him and concentrated on activating the self-destruct mechanism. Instead, he found himself lying flat on his back across the bridge. Resisting assistance from the others, he got back up and tried again.

'Captain, there's no way to initialise the self-destruct system. I recommend you let me try something else.'

'Do it,' Astar ordered. *'And do it fast. Talen tells me that we'll have the entire database in another five minutes. You have that long to do what you need to do.'*

'Beam the others back and get Parker in here. She probably knows far more about this technology than I do.'

'She'll be there in less than a minute.'

True to form she beamed over forty-three seconds later.

'She's here,' Xeris muttered and turned to her. 'I suppose you were already suited up?'

'Acknowledged, Astar out.'

'Stand aside, Commander. I'll sort this problem out for you.'

'You will? How kind of you,' the Romulan replied sarcastically.

'As you rightly pointed out to the Captain, I know far more about this vessel than you do.'

'And why is that, Lieutenant?'

'That information is classified,' she replied.

'There's a surprise.'

'Done,' she said a moment later. 'As soon as the data dump is complete, this bucket of bolts will fly wherever we set it to. I also disabled the quantum

tracker that was activated after Yannik vented the atmosphere.'

'Xeris to Talen, how long before the data dump is complete?'

'It just finished, sir.'

'Excellent, engage the autopilot on this vessel and send her ahead to *Starbase 535*.'

'Aye sir, Talen out.'

'Xeris to transporter room, two to beam up.'

'Stand by, Commander. Energising.'

As he beamed back to the ship, he couldn't help but wonder what the Cha'lav would do when they found their vessel missing. He imagined they would probably ask for it back, if not attack outright. It was time the captain got ready for a fight. When he and Parker were taking off their EV suits he voiced his concerns.

'Oh, they'll attack all right. In force. We'll have to make sure that we have more vessels than they do when that happens. If our allies in the region assist us it won't be a problem, unless the Cha'lav send more ships into the sector.'

'Just wonderful.'

Chapter Twenty-One

USS Pytheas

Resoto system

Stardate 55276.9 (April 12, 2378)

Captain Astar and the rest of the bridge crew had watched in horror as the bodies of dozens of dead Resoto were flushed into space by the tug of vacuum. There was nothing that any of them could do for Yannik or the dead, but the ship they could use. It would provide a fantastic opportunity to learn about the Cha'lav and maybe reverse engineer their technology. Commander Wright was staring at something on the console between their seats and frowning. He entered a few commands and then looked up sharply.

'Sir, it's starting to move under its own power,' Gonzales said.

'Get a tractor beam on that ship, now!' Wright ordered.

'Plot its trajectory,' Astar added.

'According to the astrometrics computer, the ship was heading for a region of space the locals call the Kursican Triangle,' Larson said from the helm.

'I want an away team over there to tell me what powered that ship up and why it was heading to the Triangle. I'd like to know what kind of hull that thing is constructed from and everything else we learn about it too. We may never get another opportunity.'

'What do we do then, sir?' Gonzales asked.

'Then we tow it to *Starbase 535* and let Commander Logan's engineers take the ship apart if they have to. If we have any hope of stopping the Cha'lav from whatever they have planned, we'll need that ship.'

'I'd like to lead that away team, Captain,' Wright said. 'I would like Commander Xeris and two of his best engineers, and four security personnel, including Lieutenant Parker.'

Astar nodded. 'Good selection, Commander but I need you here. Xeris will lead the away team.'

'Aye sir,' Wright replied and touched the console. 'Wright to Xeris, get three of

your engineers to transporter room two. You're going over to the Cha'lav vessel.'

'On my way,' Xeris responded.

'Shouldn't Doctor Maxx be joining them?' Gonzales asked.

'There's nothing left alive over there, Commander,' Wright replied. 'Every room was exposed to the vacuum of space.'

'Something started the engines,' she muttered.

'And we're going to find out what it was.'

'Wear environmental suits just in case there are any toxins over there, Commander,' Astar instructed. 'Maxx will be able to tell if there is any trace of the prion virus left over there.'

'Aye sir.'

'Keep an open tricorder link, sir. I'd like you to record as much data as you can, just in case.'

'We'll be careful.'

'Recall the SPRA sensors, Gonzales. We don't need them now.'

'Aye sir, recalling...There's a problem, sir. I'm only receiving telemetry from four of the probes. The fifth appears to be caught in something.'

'On screen.'

The image of the Cha'lav cruiser was replaced by that of the SPRA probe protruding from what appeared to be a tear in space.

'Sensors, what is that?'

'It is exactly what it appears to be, Captain,' Mahtani said from the science console. 'It is a spatial rupture.'

'Leading to where?'

'I don't know, sir. I'm reading normal space on the other side. I don't think this rupture is Cha'lav in origin.'

'Something's emerging, sir.'

'The away team have beamed over, sir,' Talen interrupted.

'Go to yellow alert.'

'Aye sir.'

'It is a vessel of some kind, Captain,' Gonzales said. 'Seventeen vessels, actually. They are all eleven metres in length, six metres wide and four in height.'

'It looks like a large torpedo casing,' Larson said.

'Can we spare the power for a second tractor beam?'

'Engineering reports it is possible for a limited period,' Mahtani answered, coordinating with them.

'Maintain sensors on the pod and engage the tractor beam.'

The pod's momentum changed as it was caught by the *Pytheas* and appeared to hover before it changed direction and tried to pull away. After a few seconds it stopped moving all together, held by the tractor beam.

'Can you make out any markings, Commander?' Astar asked Gonzales.

'No sir, there appears to be nothing on the outer hull at all. No markings, no airlock of any kind, not even an opening.'

Astar frowned. She had enough on her plate with the Cha'lav. 'Hail them, let's see if there's something internally.'

'Aye sir, hailing them on all frequencies.'

'No response, Captain.'

'Can we scan the interior?' Talen asked from ops, having stayed uncharacteristically silent until this point.

'Are you all right, Lieutenant?' Astar asked.

'Yes sir, something about this seems to be a little unnerving.'

'Can you pull our probe back?'

'Yes sir, it was freed when the pod emerged.'

'Captain, that's not a pod, it's a bomb!' Mahtani said suddenly.

'Explain.'

'Do you remember the dreadnoughts that the Cardassians used during the Bajoran Occupation and the Dominion War?'

'Smart bombs, programmed to seek a target on its own and detonate, without risking any Cardassian lives. Efficient and brutal.'

'I recommend we increase our distance and destroy them, sir,' Gonzales interjected, not happy with the device sitting so close.

'Not yet, Commander. I'd like to learn a little more about, before it blows up.'

Gonzales gritted her teeth. 'Aye sir.'

'Scan the interior of the lead bomb, maximum sensor gain.'

'Aye sir, scanning.'

'Are we picking up anything?' Astar asked after a moment.

'Yes sir, we're picking up a life form of some kind.'

'Beam it into sickbay, into a level six security field. Have security meet us there,' Astar replied. 'Gonzales, you have the conn.'

'Aye sir,' the tactical officer replied as the captain headed for the turbolift.

As Astar made her way to sickbay, she had a fast conversation with Xeris regarding a beacon, and his attempts to destroy the Cha'lav vessel. This was not turning into a very good day.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Dreadnought-class missile

Resoto system

Stardate 55277.0 (April 12, 2378)

Lieutenant Commander Gonzales beamed aboard the *Dreadnought*-class missile alone and immediately noticed the design was far more utilitarian than the Cardassian-designed missiles. She had taken as many engineering classes as possible while at the Academy and when she could during leave, since she believed that security officers should be able to get themselves out of a tight spot without engineers there to assist them. She activated what looked like a standard console and was relieved when the screen above it came to life. This console was not touch-sensitive but full of knobs and buttons, much like mid-twenty-second century Earth technology.

'Gonzales to *Pytheas*.'

'*Wright here, Commander.*'

'I've got the main power systems working, and it would appear that this was the only one with a lifeform in it. The others are all piloted remotely from here.'

'*Can you disable them? I don't like having so many missiles so close.*'

'I believe I can sir, but it will require a few minutes.'

'*Take your time,*' Wright replied. '*We don't want a massive explosion.*'

'Aye sir, Gonzales out.'

She began to press buttons and adjust knobs and was relieved when a tactical overlay appeared on the screen, detailing the locations of the missiles, the *Pytheas* and the Cha'lav vessel. The technology was simplistic to her, but she was still careful.

'*Warning,*' a computer voice stated. '*Missiles cannot be deactivated while alert status red is engaged. Do you wish to end alert status red.*'

'Yes,' Gonzales replied. 'End alert status red, return to alert status green.'

'Enemy vessel in proximity, alert status yellow recommended.'

'Alert status yellow,' Gonzales stated. 'Deactivate missiles.'

'Alert status yellow confirmed. Missiles locked on target but not armed.'

'Gonzales to Pytheas.'

'Yes, Commander?' Astar asked.

'I've disarmed the missiles, but they are still locked onto the Cha'lav ship. Is the alien all right, sir?'

'The alien is fine, Commander. Doctor Maxx is treating him for minor injuries and recommended I go back in a few hours. Pilot the missiles into shuttlebay two and then return to the bridge. I have a feeling that this just introduced a new wrinkle into the situation.'

'Aye sir, I'll need a few minutes to get the hang of the navigational and piloting systems.'

'We're in no hurry, Commander; Astar out.'

Gonzales moved to a different console, noting that nothing was linked in this vessel. Every aspect was controlled somewhere else. Perhaps because it was a cultural thing. There didn't seem to be any reason why more than one person was needed to pilot this missile. It didn't take her long to figure out the controls and within minutes she began to pilot the missiles toward the Pytheas. Then the engines cut own.

'Warning, missile is off-course from target lock. Adjust course immediately.'

Gonzales sighed. 'Target has been neutralised.'

'Negative, target remains intact. Alert status red enabled.'

'Damn.'

'Astar to Gonzales. what's happening, Commander?'

'The missile's computer guidance system is overriding my commands, sir. Attempting to deactivate it.'

'The away team is back aboard, Commander. We're sending the Cha'lav ship back to Starbase 535,' Astar told her.

'The missiles will follow it, sir. I think I can stop them, but I'll need a few minutes.'

'We're making preparations to return to the Starbase, Commander. You have ten minutes.'

'Aye sir, Gonzales out.'

'Computer, listen to me. The enemy vessel has been captured by the Resoto Hegemony. It is no longer under Cha'lav control.'

'Attempting to confirm, stand by...No Resoto lifesigns detected, information provided is false.'

'The Resoto are a dead people now. My people are remotely piloting the vessel to our nearest base to learn about the enemy and stop them. If you destroy this vessel, you will be assisting the Cha'lav.'

'Scanning the enemy vessel...Scan complete. You are telling the truth. No Cha'lav lifesigns detected. Alert status green, all missiles disarmed and in hibernation mode. An alternative method of transportation is needed. The spatial rift has closed.'

'I will pilot this missile into the alternative method of transportation.'

'Acknowledged.'

'Pytheas, this is Gonzales. The missiles have been disarmed. I'm bringing them into shuttlebay two now.'

'Understood, Commander; Astar out.'

Gonzales piloted the missiles into the shuttlebay and then had herself beamed to the upper platform of the bay, watching as the missiles attached themselves to each other minimise the amount of space they took up. She was amazed at the speed with which they manoeuvred in such a small area as the shuttlebay. As soon as the seventeen missiles were sat on top of one another in two stacks of six and one of five, the engines all dulled from the ruby red to

nothingness and the shuttlebay become completely silent.

She returned to the bridge thinking that Starfleet should start using these types of things instead of the *Peregrine*-class fighters to minimise the loss of life in future conflicts. The Federation attack fighters were modified *Peregrine* couriers with heavy armaments, but these missiles were essentially mobile weapons platforms with far more firepower. If it seemed like the missile was going to be captured then it could be detonated, taking an enemy vessel with it, and no Starfleet lives would be lost in the process.

By the time she reached the bridge, the Captain had gone back down to sickbay with Parker and Wright was in his own chair, clearly not feeling the necessity of moving to the Captain's one since the two chairs were only a foot away from each other.

'Please take your station, Commander and prepare for return to *Starbase 535*.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales replied and relieved Snowcroft from the station.

The cadet shot her an understanding look before fleeing into the turbolift. Gonzales smiled wryly, Wright did have a way about him that rubbed people the wrong way. But from what she had seen of him, it wasn't his personality that they disliked, but his Starfleet record of getting his crewmates killed. It was not a good place for a first officer to be in, especially when he was left in command of the ship so frequently as the captain preferred to lead from the front.

Chapter Twenty-Three

USS Pytheas

Resoto system

Stardate 55277.1 (April 12, 2378)

The alien lifeform beamed aboard from the missile was a two-metre-tall humanoid. He did nothing to alarm anyone as Captain Astar and Lieutenant Parker arrived in sickbay again to question him, having been ejected earlier so Maxx could attend to his injuries which had most likely come from the rift.

‘Well?’ Astar asked her chief medical officer for the third time.

‘Captain, the universal translator is working and we can understand his language, just as he can understand ours. He is completely healthy by the same standards that I would judge even our non-humanoid crewmen. Rashal is no danger to this crew or this ship.’

‘What have you learned about him?’

‘He comes from a world called Eeroth and is a Fahir, one of two sentient species native to that world. His missile was on patrol at the edge of Eerothian territory when he was attacked by a Cha’lav scout ship. The Dahrek ship, the other native species, joined in the attack and his missile was damaged. Rashal has been drifting in his pod for more than one Standard year. He doesn’t know where he is or where his homeworld is in relation to us.’

‘You appear to have learned quite a bit, but what we have discovered from our analysis of his missile and its database doesn't confirm his story.’

‘How so, Captain,’ Maxx asked, shooting an annoyed glance at Rashal.

‘We detected a subspace rift and seventeen missiles emerged, not just one. I doubt he would be in such good condition had he been adrift for so long. No matter, we can’t return him home at the moment. He’ll have to come with us back to *Starbase 535*.’

‘That will be fine, Captain,’ Rashal replied in a lyrical tone.

Astar turned to face him. ‘I apologise, not speaking to you directly was rude. Can you tell me why you lied to my doctor?’

'It is quite alright, Captain. I am used to such treatment on my homeworld. I expect it, and in turn, lying has become second nature to protect oneself from the Dahreki government.'

Astar frowned. 'Such behaviour is beneath us, Rashal. The cultures represented on this vessel, and in all of the Federation and Starfleet, value individuality and tolerance above all else. I fear that I have not made a good first impression.'

Rashal smiled. 'Quite the contrary. My treatment since being retrieved from my missile-ship has been most gracious. I fully expected to be imprisoned and badly-treated. Such is the expectation of my people since the Dahreki became the dominant species through conquest.'

'Conquest?'

'Yes, Captain. The Fahir favour colonisation and peaceful coexistence with native populations. The Dahrek conquer worlds and take slaves from the native populations.'

'I see,' she replied. 'Now you know we do not plan to harm you, can you tell me the truth?'

'Wright to Astar.'

'Go ahead, Commander.'

'Gonzales is back aboard, sir. The missiles are all aboard and powered down; and the Cha'lav vessel is already at high warp on its way to the Starbase. We've also downloaded the entire database from both vessels to study.'

'Excellent. Set a course for *Starbase 535* and prepare to get underway.'

'Aye sir, Wright out.'

'You have also fought the Cha'lav?'

'We have been fighting them for a little over a week, but they have caused many problems in that time, and been responsible for many deaths. The truth about your situation, please? I will not ask so kindly again.'

'I wish you all the luck in stopping them, Captain. The Fahira have become cannon fodder in the Dahreki's war against the Cha'lav and I had been able to gather enough forces to take over at least one fleet back from the Dahreki for the Fahira. It would have given us some say in the war, but we were betrayed and I was unable to properly calibrate the rift for travel. I have no idea where I am in relation to my homeworld. That much was true.'

'Hopefully when this current crisis is over, we'll be able to return you to your people so you can warn them, if we're not too late by then.'

'I would appreciate that, Captain, but the Dahreki are powerful enough to hold them off for a while longer, they have been doing so for over a year.'

'Wright to Astar.'

'Are we ready to depart, Commander?'

'Yes sir, all stations report ready for departure. Although the missiles are powered down a level six forcefield has been erected around them. I felt it a necessary security precaution.'

'Good work, Commander. I would have done the same. Has our science team begun work on the Cha'lav database?'

'Yes sir, Lieutenant Mahtani has assembled everyone with any scientific knowledge of linguistics and cryptology.'

'Then take us to Starbase 535, warp six.'

'Aye sir, Wright out.'

Astar heard the nacelles move into position and imagined that she could feel the increase in speed as the *Pytheas* jumped to warp. She couldn't of course, had she been able to, it would have been the last thing she felt before becoming a smudge on the bulkhead in sickbay. She turned back to Rashal and studied him for a moment.

'Rashal, could you assist us in the translation of the Cha'lav database? Your people have more experience with them than we do.'

'I will do my best, Captain, but we have not been able to capture any ships. The best we have been able to do is capture personnel and translate the

documents they have on them, it is of course mostly military.'

'That will be a good start,' Astar replied with a smile and looked at Maxx. 'Can he be released from sickbay?'

'Yes, I've arranged quarters for him, Captain.'

'Parker, escort him to quarters and show him how to use the replicators. I want a guard on him at all times.'

Parker nodded and Astar left sickbay, headed for the bridge and the reports she needed to write and sign off.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Asteroid DN-646

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55278.6 (April 12, 2378)

Lieutenant Paul Marshall stood up and dusted himself off. The antimatter storage pods were losing integrity and there was nothing he could do about it. One pod had already destroyed asteroid DN-612 and there were dozens of pods on this lump of rock. The Starfleet Corps of Engineers had used antimatter explosions to create the habitats for the mining domes two years earlier. He'd just spent the better part of a day trying to figure out why that pod failed. There had been no power drain that his tricorder or the *Weisskopf's* sensors could detect and he hadn't detected any sabotage. After almost a day of scanning, poking and prodding, he had been able to find nothing to explain the loss of integrity to the antimatter shielding.

The two asteroids were several thousand kilometres apart and the pods on this one were now failing as well. Something was affecting the antimatter that their sensors couldn't detect. The other scientists and security personnel left here with him had been evacuating the scientists to whatever shuttlecraft, freighter or ore-carrier that they could get them out of the danger zone as it was likely that the resultant antimatter detonation would most likely destroy this section of the asteroid belt and the damage would be increased a thousand-fold by the dilithium ore that riddled the belt. The one thing that made him stay when the *Weisskopf* was called away was that his lover, friend and fellow intelligence operative, Lieutenant Commander Miles Murdoch, agreed to oversee the evacuation since he had the requisite experience.

He knew their relationship had soured a little recently since Murdoch's extended mission in the Kursican sector but that issue was now at an end, since they were both stuck in this sector indefinitely, until the Cha'lav issue was solved. Marshall checked the chronometer on his tricorder and realised it had been nearly twenty hours since he had last eaten something. He sought Murdoch out and found him in the asteroid's shuttlebay, working on an ancient-looking antimatter freighter. Beyond him lay a dozen shuttles and small craft of various sizes all of which were being loaded with personnel and belongings of the three hundred people from the mining outpost. Those ships weren't going to be enough; there were still about sixty people who would be left behind. Marshall watched Murdoch's jerky movements as he fixed something in place on the underside of the massive freighter.

Murdoch slid out and pulled himself up, wiping his hands on his uniform trousers, and then turned to face Marshall, not in the least surprised to see him standing there. 'How's it going?'

'Not good; I wondered if you'd like to get something to eat.'

He nodded. 'I take it you figured it out yet?'

Marshall shook his head and frowned. 'There's nothing wrong with the pods and there's nothing causing a power drain. The pods are just losing integrity. I think there's something in the system that our sensors and tricorders can't detect that's doing this. But whatever it is, we have to be gone before the first pod loses integrity.'

'How long do we have?'

'A few hours at most,' he replied.

'And you still want to have something to eat?'

'I haven't eaten anything in hours.'

'Fair enough, I could use the break.'

'What are you working on that heap of junk for?'

'From the outside it might look like a pile of rusting bulkheads, but inside it is structurally sound.'

'You're not planning to fly this thing?' he asked incredulously.

'You know that I can fly anything,' Murdoch replied with a wry grin. 'And besides, we need to get the rest of the people out of here somehow.' Then he grinned. 'The miners said if I can get them out of here I can keep it. It's no good for hauling antimatter dilithium in its current condition.'

Marshall nodded. 'I hope you can work a miracle then.'

'If I don't get it working, then the last of us will die here and I plan on making it home for my niece's birthday. Commander Dhrex left us here to figure what went wrong in the first place. Since we can't, it makes sense to work on a plan for getting everyone out of here.'

'I know you're right, it's just frustrating that I can't figure this out. But, the sooner we get out of here the sooner we can get back to our actual mission.'

Murdoch ignored the last comment. 'The engines on this ship are fine, ready to fly. How much antimatter can it store? We can move as much as possible from the pods into the ship. It could buy us more time.'

Marshall shook his head. 'The freighter's storage capacity is about 15 pods worth. That still leaves over twenty pods to explode.'

'What if we jettisoned the remaining pods further into the asteroid field?'

Marshall considered the idea. 'It won't work. As soon as the pods were jettisoned, they'd be exposed to whatever is making them lose integrity. Without the dome's shielding, the pods would explode in seconds.'

Murdoch conceded the point. 'I'll keep fixing the ship; you bring the pods through and get as much help as you can.'

'What's wrong with this thing anyway?'

'Stabilisers and thrusters are busted, shields are almost non-existent and the pop gun phasers have no charge because the impulse fusion core is depleted.'

'In other words, it's going to be a rough ride?'

'I think I just said that, but I'll do my best in giving us enough power to get out of here.'

Marshall scowled and then rushed off, leaving Murdoch to fix the ship. He grabbed the other Starfleet personnel and told them what they were doing.

'Find every antigrav you can and get fifteen antimatter pods into the shuttlebay, then load the antimatter into the ship's storage cells. Once you're done, move the rest of the pods into the most shielded section of the base. Then get to the freighter and the shuttles.'

'Aye sir,' they replied and scattered.

Marshall went straight to the storage bay and marked the pods which had the lowest integrity. There was a marked loss in the pods closest to the outer shell of the base and he resolved to move them first.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Asteroid DN-646

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55278.7 (April 12, 2378)

'Can you handle this yourself?' Marshall asked one of the miners. 'I'll send the others to help you shortly. I need to start loading these onto the freighter.'

'I can do it, Lieutenant. Thanks for saving our lives.'

'Lieutenant Commander Murdoch has the hard part, flying us all out of here.'

'Is it true he works for Starfleet Intelligence?'

He nodded. 'Don't worry, so do I.'

The young miner nodded and moved off with the pod.

'Come on, we'd better get this antimatter aboard otherwise this rust bucket will never take off.'

Murdoch looked at him surprise and then headed up the ramp after him. 'I've been inspecting the systems on board and they're somewhat antiquated, but they'll get us out of here. Nechayev's people will make her spaceworthy in under a week.'

'She's not spaceworthy now?'

'Paul, she's a century out of date with duotronic technology. I'm amazed this bucket is still in use, but she's holding up incredibly well.'

'But she will fly?'

Murdoch gave him a forlorn look. 'I thought we'd been through this. I can fly anything.'

Marshall held his hands up in surrender. 'Can you transfer the antimatter or do you need my help?'

'I can manage, but we have a lot of pods to transfer.'

'Alright, I'm going to the control room to see if I can buy us some more time. I fear we have an hour at most.'

'Warning, antimatter containment down to fifty percent,' the computer's feminine voice intoned.

'Maybe less,' Marshall amended wryly.

'Go!' Murdoch pushed him toward the corridor and the ramp.

Marshall ran for the control room. 'Computer, what's the estimated time to antimatter containment failure?'

'Antimatter containment failure will occur in forty-seven minutes, eleven seconds.'

'Damn,' he muttered and tried not to think about the pods crowding the room as he closed and sealed all the bulkhead doors between him and the shuttle bay, except one route to be used only if needed. He tapped his combadge. 'Marshall to Murdoch, do you have a transporter?'

'No, sorry.'

Marshall muttered an oath under his breath. 'I'm gonna be running for it real quick. Be ready to go straight away.'

'How long do we have?'

'Warning, antimatter containment fields are down to thirty percent.'

'There's your answer. I'm coming now, the containment fields are fluctuating. I've no idea how much time is left.'

'Move, Paul. There's no more time.'

'Computer, engage program Marshall-Escape-1, mark.'

The control room bulkhead started to slide shut and he ducked under it and started to run. The bulkheads were all closing in sequence and he would need to run faster to make it.

'Come on, , I can't keep the door open for much longer. The computer is

venting the atmosphere from the entire base.'

He turned the corner into the last corridor and saw the bulkhead less than a metre off the floor. He dived for it and pulled his feet through just in time. Picking himself up again, he ran up the ramp and hit the close button.

'I'm in.'

'Lifting off, come and join me, Paul.'

Marshall reached the cockpit and slammed himself into the co-pilot's chair as the freighter left the mining base and into the asteroid field. There were thousands of kilometres between some of the asteroids, but that was all going to change.

'Engaging impulse engines, full speed.'

'Is that safe?' he asked, sitting down.

'Not in the least, but when that antimatter explosion hits us, we'll need every burst of speed, and even I'm not crazy enough to go to warp in an asteroid field.'

'Computer, aft view.'

'Sorry, no computer that sophisticated on here,' Murdoch apologised. 'Told you it was old,' he added as he hit a switch.

One of the monitors showed an aft view as the asteroid exploded. Murdoch kept one eye on the path ahead and the other on the screen beside him that told him the danger. Alarm klaxons started wailing and Marshall gasped as the explosive shockwave hit them. The freighter was tossed around and the bulkheads groaned.

'Turn her into the wave,' Marshall yelled as he gripped his seat.

'What do you think I'm trying to do,' Murdoch yelled back. 'This isn't a Starfleet vessel, it's an old freighter with half her systems out.'

The freighter turned slowly but surely into the wave, riding the shockwave like a surfer. It was over in moments, but it felt like a lifetime.

'Can we go to warp yet?' Marshall asked, looking at the readouts.

'We can, but the best this bucket can do in its present condition is warp three. It'll take us a while to get back to Starbase 535.'

'Then let's get a move on, we'd best meet up with the other shuttles and form a convoy. Safety in numbers.'

Murdoch nodded. 'On that subject, do you think you can disconnect the shields from the warp engines, we'll need the extra power to use the transporter when we get to the starbase.'

'Can't we land?'

'Not anymore, the shockwave knocked out the landing struts.'

'Any more good news you'd like to share with me?'

'Not really, I think that about covers it.'

Marshall sighed. 'Do you think Nechayev will upgrade this freighter for us to use while we're here?'

'She might, but it would require weeks in dock and there's nothing close,' he said as he engaged the warp drive. 'It would take a month to get to the nearest repair facility, and I doubt we have that much time to spare, especially with the Cha'lav getting bolder.'

The century-old freighter shuddered and bucked as it built up speed but then slipped easily into warp. Murdoch deftly brought the ship up to warp two point five, so she wasn't stressed.

'Think you could send out a distress signal for me?' he asked.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Starbase 535

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55279.1 (April 12, 2378)

'Captain, Captain Logan would like you and Lieutenant Parker to join him in his office, immediately,' Gonzales said as soon as the *Pytheas* docked with the starbase.

'Tell him we're on our way,' Astar replied with a sigh and turned to her exec. 'See to the download of the data we acquired and any repairs that need doing. I don't expect to be here long.'

'Aye sir.'

When Astar and Parker entered Operations a few minutes later, they looked around and saw almost an entirely new staff, even though it was alpha shift. They glanced at each other in surprise as Logan emerged from his office and stepped down to meet them.

'I gather you've noticed the change in staff?'

'We did,' Astar replied.

'It was necessary considering the new situation.'

'Which is?' Parker asked.

'The reason you're both here. Come into my office and I'll explain everything.'

Another man stood up and stepped forward as they entered. 'Commander Martin Madden. I'm Captain Logan's new first officer, and your liaison to Operation Cobalt.'

'Operation Cobalt?' Astar asked.

'Operation Cobalt is the Starfleet Tactical codename for the Cha'lav threat, Captain,' Parker answered. 'Based on a specific piece of information which I assume has now been verified?'

'It has,' Madden replied as Logan took a seat and gestured for the others to do

the same. 'Admiral Ranar uncovered evidence that Andraprani zh'Malashan has surfaced from her decade-long hiding place.'

'Where is she?'

'She hitched a ride on a freighter headed out this way two years ago. According to the locals, she purchased a fast ship and headed into the Kursican Triangle. That was a year ago.'

'And the Cha'lav have been attacking Eeroth for around that length of time,' Astar muttered.

'Exactly,' Madden replied. 'There is one other problem.'

Logan glanced at Parker. 'Your Andorian friend aggravated the Klingons and they have sent one of their *Qang*-class ships to find her. We've kept what we can from them, but they will find out eventually.'

'We have to find her first,' Parker responded. 'I made a vow to stop her, whatever the cost.'

'And Admiral Ranar agrees,' Madden told her. 'That's why he has given you a code black authorisation.'

Astar turned to see the predatory gleam in her security chief's eyes. 'Is there something I'm missing?'

'Quite a lot actually, Captain,' Logan elaborated. 'Code black is Intelligence speak for one of the most difficult assignments a field agent can be given.'

'Meaning?'

'To put it simply,' Madden started before being interrupted.

'It means "terminate with extreme prejudice,"' Parker said. 'With the addendum that all Starfleet general orders and regulations are rescinded for the duration of the assignment, except for the Prime Directive.'

Astar couldn't believe what she was hearing. 'You actually practice this behaviour?'

'Only in extreme circumstances,' Madden hastily tried to appease her.

'Zh'Malashan has become a traitor and is actively assisting the Cha'lav in circumventing our technology and gaining a foothold in our territory. After what we suffered during the Dominion war I'm sure you don't want that happening again?'

'Of course not, but to sink to that level?'

'What choice do we have, Captain?' Parker asked. 'If Prani gives the Cha'lav everything she knows about our weaknesses and gaps in our defences, what chance will we have against them?'

Astar nodded. 'I concede the point, but I don't like it.'

'I won't put the ship at risk, Captain. If I find her, I'd like to use the *Onizuka* to go and complete the mission. It's the only vessel fast enough and powerful enough to catch her.'

'I'll see what I can do, but if push comes to shove, we'll take the *Pytheas* after her,' Astar stated. 'If she presents that large a risk, then you'll need all the help you can get.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Now that's out the way, tell me about what you have regarding the Cha'lav and this alien you retrieved?'

It took somewhat under an hour to provide all the information and when they were done they were all hungry but Logan sensed Parker had something more to share and asked her about it.

'While Captain Drummond remains alive, he remains a security risk to the Federation. The Cha'lav have sophisticated mind-altering techniques, and among them is the alien waveform that has penetrated his consciousness. He is fighting them off admirably, but he should be removed from active duty. I suggest he be transferred to the sickbay aboard the Starbase where he can be closely monitored at all times.'

'Drummond has already been transferred to a secured section of the Starbase, along with the former alpha-shift Operations crew and the database you downloaded from the Cha'lav,' Madden informed them. 'The Eeroth database is being folded into our own star charts as we speak. What can you tell me about Lieutenant Ryan McNamara?'

'He was instrumental in shutting down the gateway and I think he's more than earned his promotion. He's wasted as a deputy chief of security.'

'I agree,' Logan replied and turned to Madden. 'Who's your number two?'

Madden considered the question. 'I'll talk to the Admiral. Based on what you've told me, I don't think they'll be a problem with his transfer to Tactical, or the promotion to Lieutenant Commander.'

'Excellent,' Logan smiled. 'How about we break for a late dinner and then get back to something resembling normality?'

'Sounds like a great idea to me,' Madden said, 'but I need to have a long conversation with Admiral Ranar about our resources in this sector, and about the Klingons and Romulans, and why they're poking their noses in.'

'We'll see you later then, Commander,' Astar said with a wry smile, not envying the man his task ahead.

'Captain, if you don't mind, I have some preparations to make,' Parker said.

'Of course, Lieutenant.'

'Enjoy your meal, Captains,' the security chief said and left the office.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Starbase 535

Kursican Sector

Stardate 55279.2 (April 12, 2378)

It was not a particularly pleasant conversation for dinner, but Logan felt it best to discuss it in a more informal atmosphere, knowing how prideful this particular captain could be in defending her position.

'Captain, there was something I wanted to bring up, but I felt it should be just between us, as senior officers.'

'I suppose you are referring to the matter of my refusal to help the Resoto, and the resulting near-extinction of their species.'

'I am,' Logan replied. 'I know there are a few Resoto that live off-world, Captain. They survived the extinction of their homeworld and will need our help to continue surviving.'

'If I'm not mistaken, reports from the *Weisskopf* indicate they've become pirates and are attacking any vessel they think they can pillage,' Astar replied. 'It sounds as though they're taking care of themselves, reverting to their earlier pattern of survival before being united.'

'That isn't an acceptable survival strategy,' Logan countered.

'Perhaps not, but the locals are aware of this and are used to it, or have been in the past.'

'On that point we'll have to agree to disagree, wouldn't you say?'

Astar nodded.

'Has Lieutenant Parker told you anything she shouldn't have?'

'She told me about the Cha'lav's "phase one" plan.'

'She shouldn't have.'

'I need to know anything that could harm my people out there, Captain,' Astar raised her voice a little. 'Ranar's edict of strict need-to-know cost a lot of lives

this time. Those losses are unacceptable and I intend to minimise those losses when it comes to my crew.'

'All right, I can accept that, and I will try to provide what information I can, but I make no promises.' At Astar's nod, he continued through his list of her issues. 'I don't trust Commander Wright. There is something about him that I can't put my finger on, but I get bad vibes from him.'

'You and the rest of my crew,' Astar replied, which surprised him. 'He's cut from a different mould, I'll accept that, but he does his job well, and hasn't tried to kill me yet.'

'Do you believe he will?'

'If it furthers his goals, yes. But until we reach that stage, I have no complaints.'

Logan shook his head. 'All right, we'll leave that issue for now. On to more important matters. The Klingons are coming, you know that much, and with you gallivanting around the sector, I'm going to have to keep the *Weisskopf* close to home, and they aren't a match for the *Chancellor*-class ship, not even close.'

'You think an *Intrepid* is better than a *Nova*?' Astar asked. 'I think it is pointless to try and guess. They have their own agenda, just as the Romulans do.'

'You're probably right,' he replied and then slumped a little. 'I'm sorry to have to do this to you, Captain, but I'm placing a reprimand in your permanent file for your handling of the Resoto crisis,' he held up his hand. 'Before you tell me there was no possible way you could have cured them, I agree. I've spoken with Doctor Bashir on *Deep Space Nine*, Doctor Crusher on the *Enterprise* and the Head of Starfleet Medical. They all agree that even your genius doctor could not have created a cure in the time available. However, that said, you should have made a greater effort to prevent High Lord Yannik from returning to his homeworld.'

'So I'm reprimanded, I'll live with it,' Astar replied. 'I made a judgement call and I was wrong. I will have to live with those deaths on my hands for the rest of my lives. Have you made a decision about my taking Rashal back to his people?'

'Unfortunately, that's out of my hands. Admiral Ranar will make that decision. I've read your report on the Eeroth, and I have my people swarming all over that Cha'lav ship you brought us as a gift.'

Astar couldn't hide her lack of interest. 'Where is Rashal now?'

'He is being debriefed at the moment.'

'Trying to learn about his people or the Cha'lav?'

'Both, actually, but the Cha'lav threat is clearly apparent now. Starfleet Tactical want this kept as quiet as possible. On a lighter note, your field commission for Sheena Gonzales has been approved by the powers that be.'

'Gonzales will be glad to know that.'

'How long before the *Pytheas* can leave?'

'A few hours, immediately if necessary. Is there something you want us to do?'

'As you know, the *Weisskopf* was diverted to the Ynelav system after the Resoto system and left a few personnel on board asteroid DN-646. Our long-range sensors picked up a number of small vessels fleeing and then a massive antimatter explosion a few hours ago. We've not been able to contact any of the vessels or the Starfleet personnel which were left behind. I'd like you to head over there and find out what happened to them.'

'I'll recall my people, Commander.'

'Thank you, Captain, dismissed.'

Astar exited Logan's office and tapped her combadge, calling her executive officer.

'*Captain?*'

'Recall the crew from shore leave, we have a new assignment.'

'*Already?*'

'Yes, Commander, already. Recall the crew and set a course for asteroid DN-646. I expect to leave within the hour.'

'Aye sir, I'll recall the crew immediately.'

'Good, Astar out.'

By the time she reached the bridge, Wright was standing by her chair with a small smile on his face. 'The crew are all aboard.'

'Clear us with Ops, Ensign. Engage at maximum warp as soon as we clear the starbase.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied as the starship disengaged from the starbase.

'Ops has cleared us, Captain Logan is hailing.'

'On screen.'

'Good luck, Captain.'

'I'll be back with the *Weisskopf's* officers as soon as I can be.'

'Of that I have no doubt, Logan out.'

The *Pytheas* would be back and Astar knew that she would be returning the Eroth to his homeworld eventually, though hopefully it would be sooner rather than later since the Cha'lav were known to be in the area.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Mining freighter

The Kursican sector

Stardate 55279.9 (April 13, 2378)

Murdoch returned to the pilot's seat, relieving Marshall from the tedium of sitting in the pilot's chair as the ship travelled on autopilot. He saw that the shields had been reconstituted and what weapons he did have were able to be used, but the impulse engines were still offline. They'd been travelling at low warp for about twenty hours and sensors had picked up no sign of any Federation ship other than the convoy of shuttles, runabouts and freighters.

'You're worried, aren't you?' Marshall asked from the seat behind him.

'Aren't you?' he replied.

'Of course, but I'm trying not to let it show. We made it and we're heading home. You shouldn't be too worried.'

'I'm worried and I can't tell you why. Something just doesn't feel right.'

Marshall smiled grimly. 'You should trust your instincts. You know what happened last time you ignored them.'

He nodded and his features hardened. 'Have every vessel with weapons form a diamond around the others with me at its head. We're about to be attacked.'

'How do you...?'

'Just make the formation.'

Marshall nodded and seconds later the proximity klaxon sounded. 'Two Resoto ships are coming out of warp, weapons hot.'

'Hail them, tell them we're mining refugees,' Murdoch sighed. 'I hate being right.'

Marshall did as he was asked, but after several seconds reported, 'no response.'

'Raise shields and ready phasers.'

'They won't do much damage.'

'Not alone, no, but the runabouts have fairly good phasers and hopefully a couple of microtorpedoes. Send a distress call on all Federation frequencies.'

'They're firing,' Marshall called out as the freighter bucked like an angry donkey.

'Return fire.'

Marshall nodded and targeted the lead Resoto vessel's weapons emplacements. His shots were well placed, thanks to his advanced tactical training for his life in Intelligence work, because the Resoto's shield envelope collapsed. Two of the runabouts broke formation and fired their more powerful phasers. One of the Resoto vessel's nacelles exploded and the ship veered off, leaving just one for the convoy to deal with.

'Nice coordination,' Murdoch muttered.

The lone Resoto vessel dived toward the break in the upper quadrant of the diamond but two microtorpedoes blew its engines off.

'I wonder why the Resoto are attacking us,' Marshall muttered.

'Perhaps we'll find out when we return to the Starbase, but I'll bet it has something to do with their homeworld being wiped out. They no longer have an infrastructure,' Murdoch said. 'How are we doing with those impulse engines?'

'They're a lost cause,' Marshall replied. 'The shockwave damaged them beyond what repairs I would have been able to make.'

'Al right then, we'll have to hope that a starship comes along to help us then, won't we?' Murdoch sighed.

The proximity alarm sounded and Marshall's eyes snapped toward the small screen. 'A vessel is slowing to match speed with us. The sensors identify it as...Starfleet, it's the USS *Pytheas*.'

'Thank god for that.'

'This is Captain Astar of the Federation starship Pytheas, do you require assistance?'

'This is Lieutenant Commander Miles Murdoch and Lieutenant Paul Marshall of Starfleet Intelligence. Our impulse engines are damaged and I have a lot of frightened and hungry people here.'

'We all survived the destruction of the asteroid.'

'I'm glad to hear it, and I know Captain Logan will be as well. If you'd like to beam over, we'll get you settled in to more comfortable accommodations until we reach Starbase 535.'

Marshall looked over at Murdoch who just returned his gaze, his face unreadable. 'Thank you, Captain. If you could begin transporting the miners and scientists, I'll slow to warp one. I will remain here for the time being.'

'Understood, Astar out.'

'You could have gone to the *Pytheas*; it's a lot more comfortable over there than it is here.'

Marshall smiled. 'I will, once everyone is safe. Then the *Pytheas* can take us in tow to the starbase where the engineers can make rudimentary repairs.'

'All right, I'll get everyone prepped for transport,' Marshall replied and headed aft.

Murdoch slowed to warp one and watched the *Intrepid*-class starship do the same. He hated to leave the freighter in a tractor beam, but after their flight from the asteroid field and the stresses of even low warp on the old space frame, he doubted it would be comfortable flying back to Earth. *Starbase 535* had engineers capable of replacing the impulse engines and rebuilding the structural integrity field—which was going to take a heavy beating as the freighter slowed from warp one to thrusters when they reached Kursica.

'Marshall to Murdoch, we ready to begin transport.'

'Murdoch to *Pytheas*.'

'Go ahead.'

'We're ready to begin transport.'

'Acknowledged, transport in progress.'

Marshall returned to the cockpit almost five minutes later. 'We're the last.'

Murdoch took a last look around the freighter. 'She'll do, once she's been spruced up a little.'

'Are you going to name her?'

Murdoch grinned. 'When I see what she looks like, a name will come to me.'

Marshall nodded. 'Just like always.'

'Murdoch to *Pytheas*, two to beam up.'

As they materialised on board the starship, they saw Captain Astar and she didn't look happy.

'Captain?'

'Lieutenant Marshall, next time I'd like to know when you're going to just pop up, though I am gratified to see you safe. Can you tell me what happened?'

'I wish we knew, sir,' Marshall replied. 'Whatever caused it, our tricorders and sensors couldn't detect it.'

'Do you have the scans you took?'

Marshall held up his tricorder. 'Right here.'

'We'll see if we can get anything more out of it. Right now, I think you two need a shower and I suppose you'll want something to eat.'

'Thank you, Captain.'

'Dismissed.'

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Secure Prison Facility

Ynelav IV

Stardate 55280.8 (April 13, 2378)

Commander Dhrex walked behind Regent Dolan as they traversed the narrow corridors of the ageing prison facility. The cells they had already passed were thankfully empty but the skeletons and stench of death was plain. It did not make him think these people worthy of membership but he would hold his judgement for now. He was just here to make a preliminary report for the Federation Council. They would decide whether to assign a team of diplomats or a Starfleet representative to assist these people in preparing for membership. They passed through a stone arch and then three heavily armed guards before stopping outside another cell. This one was cleaner than the others, and smelled less, but it was still a medieval cell, even by his people's standards.

'Here he is, Commander, the terrorist.'

Dhrex sighed. The man was a cleric who refused to break his vows, and for this he had been imprisoned. 'He is a cleric, is he not?'

'He is a terrorist. By refusing to reveal the identities of enemy combatants, he becomes one of them under our legal system.'

'Regent, if you want to seriously consider becoming a member of the Federation, this legal system will have to change. All Federation citizens have the right to freedom of speech and expression and the right not to be incarcerated for their beliefs. By imprisoning this man for not breaking his religious vows, you are making it difficult for me to recommend this world for membership.'

'When will you submit your report?'

'I have been given three of my months in order to gather information for my report. If by that time I do not see that your people are ready—or on their way to being ready—for membership, then that will go into my report. Do not look so crestfallen, there have been instances, recently in fact, where a world has been given a second chance.'

'I see,' Dolan replied. 'My problem is that I have not had to deal with anything

like this as a scientist. I am not equipped to deal with such things.'

'That is why you surround yourself with experts on such matters, so that they might guide you into making the correct decision. You will make mistakes, everybody does, but you must make sure that yours are small. Big mistakes will be remembered forever.'

'Being a leader is hard,' Dolan muttered.

'You have the strength of character, just try to believe in yourself.'

Dolan nodded and turned to the cleric. 'Adept, will you reveal the identities of those who commit acts of aggression against us?'

'I cannot, Regent. Perhaps when you find the Seer, he will be able to help you.'

Dolan nodded and called for the guards. 'Release him and return him to the Yotanu Shrine.'

Dhrex smiled. 'Thank you, Regent.'

The new leader turned to the guards. 'He is under house arrest and not to leave without my express permission.'

'Yes, Regent.'

'Come, Commander, let me show you the Central Library. From here you and your crew can learn all of our history and see how far we have come.'

And how far you have yet to go, Dhrex thought privately. He could see the problems that Dolan would face in the short term, terrorism was always a sore subject, but the civil war which was looming over the religious divide would cause severe issues for membership. He remembered what had happened on Bajor some years ago when a terrorist coup had seized control of the government, and *Deep Space Nine*, and ordered Starfleet to leave. The solution to that was somewhat unorthodox and only the revelation of Cardassian intervention in the terrorist group stopped the coup in its tracks.

'I would be delighted, Regent. I have always held a fascination for libraries, places where the records of an entire civilisation can be stored.'

'Unfortunately, most of our records in the early times were held by the clerics,

and a number of those shrines have been destroyed over the centuries, often through war or sabotage. Many of the clerics now have been translating the old scrolls and we place those electronic translations in the libraries for the people to read.'

'Are the translations accurate?' Dhrex asked, getting the uncomfortable feeling that religious expression was a major stumbling block.

'As accurate as our interpretations can be,' Dolan replied. 'Why do you ask?'

'Do all the scrolls follow the same sect?'

Dolan shook his head. 'No, the Seer Scrolls are written in a much older language and few of the clerics can translate them. Even the Adept can only translate the newest Seer Scrolls and they are about ten thousand years old.'

'I see. The Adept believes that the Seer is returning and will herald a new era for your people?'

'Something like that,' Dolan replied distantly.

Dhrex had hit a sore point. 'Regent, I'm feeling a little tired. Would you mind if we did the tour of the library tomorrow?'

'Not at all, Commander. Have a pleasant evening.'

'I will, thank you.'

Dhrex beamed back up to the *Weisskopf* and prepared an initial report. It would be filed as an addendum to the preliminary report and often carried much weight in the Federation Council, especially with certain Councillors. The only problem he foresaw if the Ynelavii even got a hearing in the Chamber would be President Satie. She was currently advocating a stronger core world presence, and less exploration at least in the short time, until Starfleet had replenished itself in the wake of the war. Many in Starfleet were unhappy with this, from the lowliest crewman to the Commander-in-Chief himself, but everyone followed orders.

He only hoped that when she received the next report of Cha'lav activity, she would immediately agree with the C-in-C's recommendation to send ships out to gather new allies. This was going to be a long fight, whether diplomacy was successful or not.

Chapter Thirty

Office of Starfleet Tactical

San Francisco, Earth

Stardate 55286.2 (April 15, 2378)

The polarised transparent aluminium prevented the full glare of the San Francisco sun from blinding Admiral Andrew Ranar when he entered his thirty-ninth floor office. A steaming mug of coffee was sitting on his desk waiting for him and he inhaled its aroma as he sorted through the subspace messages that awaited him. Reading through them took most of the first two hours of his day and he then looked toward the crises that were brewing or in full swing across the galaxy. There wasn't much and he was grateful for it, since he had enough trouble with the main crisis in the Kursican sector.

Something out there had piqued Chancellor Martok's interest so he felt the need to send one of his largest battle cruisers into the area to make sure Klingon interests were served, whatever they would be. The rogue Romulan Subcommander had been officially denounced by Praetor Hiren and the tensions in that sector threatened to rival those of the Romulans who had once again retreated into their own territory, though they were allowing diplomatic relations to continue, for now. Ranar frowned at the reflected image of his greying hair and then called up the day's meetings. It was a light schedule, all things considered, and he decided to make his protégé squirm a little.

Commander Madden's visage appeared on his screen in just a few moments, but the human really didn't look happy. 'Did I catch you at a bad time, Martin?'

'No sir, I was meditating.'

'I haven't had a report from two days, what's the situation out there?'

Madden sighed. *'Commander Dhrex is having doubts about the viability of the Ynelavii as members, something about their behaviour toward religious differences and Captain Astar is prowling around like a caged animal waiting for Captain Logan to give her the all clear so she can get back into space.'*

'Surely he's finished debriefing the Eerothian by now.'

'Yes sir, he has, but he's not sure he wants the Pytheas to take Rashal back to his homeworld.'

'What possible reason could he have?'

'He believes that Captain Astar will aggravate the situation with the Cha'lav since Rashal believes they may still be around.'

'What is your take on the situation?'

Madden thought for a moment. *'I think Captain Astar is the right person. She's dealt with the Cha'lav more than anyone else in this sector and has Lieutenant Parker on board.'*

'What about the other problems out there?'

'Captain Logan has provided very little information on Subcommander Sokal's reasons for being there and the Klingon ship IKS Ditagh arrived yesterday, under the command of Captain Vikagh. So far the two have not intersected or spoken with each other.'

Ranar fell silent as he digested the information and made a mental note to find out whatever he could on Vikagh and his ship. 'How is Captain Drummond?'

Madden lowered his head for a moment. *'He's still fighting and the drugs that Parker suggested have helped, but the alien consciousness is winning the war.'*

'Do you know how long he has and what will happen when the battle is done?'

'According to Parker, once the alien consciousness takes complete control of Captain Drummond, it will use whatever information he has to spread misinformation and cause disruption to the people that Drummond knew best. As for how long he has, no one can say.'

Ranar knew at that moment what his decision was going to be and regretted its necessity, but Starfleet and the Federation could not allow another foothold situation to occur. 'If it looks like he's losing, I want you to pull the plug, Martin, and make it look like an accident. If he's going to lose, I don't want whatever is taking control to do so completely.'

'Are you sure, Admiral, we might be able to talk with the consciousness and find out what the Cha'lav really want.'

'I would like nothing better, but we can't take the risk. You have your orders.'

'Aye sir. Can I make a request?'

'Of course.'

'Captain Logan doesn't know how long the Pytheas will be if he does allow Captain Astar to return Rashal to his homeworld. He'd like another starship.'

Ranar smiled. 'He's lucky he's got the two he does. I'll speak with Starfleet Operations and see if they can spare another vessel, but we're still spread fairly thin. Command would prefer to keep the majority of vessels that we do have close to Federation member worlds just in case.'

'I understand that, Admiral, but I am only passing on a message.'

'I'll see what I can do, Commander. Is there anything else I need to know about the situation out there?'

'As a matter of fact, there is, sir. Lieutenant Marshall and Lieutenant Commander Murdoch are both working the Cha'lav investigation for Admiral Nechayev. What does she have invested in this sector?'

'I have no idea, Commander. Nechayev works to her own agenda and shares what she wants to share. She has enough pull with the C-in-C so that no one bothers her and she's working on a few important projects at the moment which are classified even higher than mine is.'

Madden nodded. *'Aye sir.'*

'Remember your orders, Ranar out.'

His door opened as the screen blanked and Nechayev walked in. 'Did I hear my name mentioned?'

Ranar sighed. 'Why do you have two operatives in the Kursican sector?'

'It has nothing to do with Operation Cobalt, though they can help out if necessary.'

'Then why are they out there?'

'You know I can't tell you that.'

'Alynna, we've been friends a long time. I don't need to know the details, just the basics.'

'There's a Section Thirty-One operative out there and I want him found and debriefed before he can reach his handler. If he catches wind of Operation Cobalt, we're all in trouble.'

'Because Thirty-One would take it upon themselves to get rid of the Cha'lav whatever it takes.'

'Exactly.'

'We could use Cobalt as bait,' Ranar suggested.'

'I thought of it, which is why I'm here.'

Epilogue

Cha'lav vessel

Somewhere in the Kursican sector

Stardate 55300.4 (April 20, 2378)

The Andorian woman watched from the comfort of her ship as the other Cha'lav vessels destroyed the orbiting weapons platforms and the pathetic little ships sent against them by the population below. She marked another race off the list on her padd as the Cha'lav bombarded the planet with deadly radiation and weaponry. Nothing would ever be able to live there again. The Cha'lav-Marsupial serving as her slave brought her another report on the progress of the invasion in this galaxy and the last communique from the Conclave. Her assistance had been invaluable, even with Parker preventing the majority of the races in this sector from being eliminated. The Cha'lav had plenty more strings in their bow, and they had already begun the next phase of their assault.

Even now, a fleet of forty warships was laying waste to the homeworld of this galaxy's worst enemy, setting in motion a series of events that would leave the Federation and their allies spread too thin to combat the Cha'lav invasion fleet when it arrived. An aquatic called for her attention.

'Yes?' she asked.

'You wanted to be apprised when the Ocampo vessel surfaced,' the alien replied in its lyrical voice, decoded through the combadge pinned to the Andorian's chest.

'Where is it?'

'I've detected the signal in an area approximately eleven light years from our present position. There is too much interference in the region to localise the signal more thoroughly.'

'Use one of the local races to find what we need. It shouldn't take more than a week or so.'

'Can you afford to wait that long, Mistress?'

'I have waited for ten years, another week will not make much difference.'

'As you command.'

'Has the local population been killed yet?'

'They are proving more resilient to the radiation than estimates predicted.'

'Excellent, send ground troops to round them up. They'll make excellent slaves and cannon fodder once they have been trained.'

'The training site has not yet been selected.'

The Andorian growled low in her throat. 'I gave you over a hundred sites to choose from. What is the delay?'

'Your information is outdated,' the aquatic answered. 'Many of those planets are still in territory controlled by other races.'

'Find the one best suited to the reptilians and take it by force.'

'As you command.'

'Once the aliens have been collected, split the fleet up. I want the training ground set up as soon as possible. The creatures from the Triangle must be harvested quickly, so we'll need the medical ships assigned there. The remainder of the fleet should rendezvous in the Delta Quadrant. We have much work to do.'

'We do not have enough remaining vessels.'

'Very well, we will rendezvous with the main fleet in the Delta Quadrant. Split the remaining ships as you see fit. Do not fail me.'

'Of course, Mistress. It will be done.'

The aquatic swam off to make the necessary preparations and Andraprani zh'Malashan was left with her thoughts. She wished that she hadn't had to follow this course of events but could not live with herself knowing that so many trillions of people had died over the course of the war. At least this way she was able to make sure that the Cha'lav were successful with minimal loss of life. They controlled too vast an area, with too many vessels for one galaxy alone to stop them from conquest.

Smaller fleets were even now attempting to conquer the Milky Way's satellite galaxies, and from all reports were being quite successful in that endeavour. It was only this galaxy that had caused so much trouble. Her defection was purely for the numbers, allowing the war to be over before too many were killed. Once the war began, the warrior races would be the first to go, which was why her people had suffered so much at the hands of the Cha'lav. The only reason they had accepted her in this time, was because she could give them what they wanted. When her usefulness was at an end, they would kill or enslave her, and she was not going to let that happen without a fight.

'Mistress,' the marsupial wheezed, 'there is someone to see you.'

She smiled. 'Send him in.'

A Cha'lav-Reptilian entered the command centre and paused a respectful five steps from the massive command dais upon which zh'Malashan sat. 'I have the report you asked for, Mistress.'

'Excellent, what have you found out.'

'Starfleet has been aware of the Cha'lav since the middle of the twenty-second century. Admiral Dexe set in motion a series of events which are still being felt today.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'Elaborate.'

'A design feature lacking in starships in your thirtieth century was a subspace field modulator for the deflector dish. It has been in every Starfleet vessel in this timeline for the express purpose of opening a rift into the Voidspace.'

'How did he get away with that?'

'I'm not sure,' the reptilian replied sourly. 'That information was not available.'

'You've done far better than I expected. Thank you,' she replied and shot him in the chest. 'Unfortunately, no one else can know that information.'

It seemed as though Dexe had been planning something since before he jumped back in time to stop her, or the war. The Voidspace was only used by the Cha'lav for the long journey between galaxies, and the only possible reason he had for including it in the design of all Starfleet vessels was for an

eventual fleet to be formed to make an assault on the Cha'lav homeworld, or the Conclave. She would have to report this to them. She knew they would read it and then file it away, secure in their own superiority that no one could defeat them.

If she knew one thing about Starfleet and the Federation, it was the fact that they never gave up, and had an uncanny knack of getting out of tight spots with surprising regularity.

End