

Star Trek: Pytheas Fragments of Control

By Brother Benny

*Historian's Note: This story takes place from late May to early June 2378;
beginning one day after the events of To Serve The Unwise.*

Prologue

**Vorta Imperial Flagship
Unclaimed space
May 25, 2378 (Stardate 55395.1)**

Two Jem'Hadar blocked the doors to the Vorta's private chamber and Tal'Aura sighed in annoyance. She hated the uniformly pale colour scheme inherent in all Vorta Imperial vessels, which were not all that different to the colour of the Jem'Hadar. She was the only Romulan on board and would stay that way until the huge fleet reached Romulan territory and joined the Empire to crush the Klingon-Cardassian Alliance. First the Terran Empire had usurped their territory and then the Alliance; it was time for the Romulans to exercise their right of superiority and teach the lesser races a lesson. That mission would go nowhere if she couldn't get the damn Vorta to open up to her. He had to see that her methods were the only ones which would help his people to succeed.

'Let me through,' she implored the Jem'Hadar on the left, a nameless mass of barely-sentient muscle.

'The Vorta does not wish to be disturbed,' he replied.

'He will see me,' she stated as if it was a foregone conclusion.

'The Vorta does not wish to be disturbed,' the creature on the right added his opinion, if you could call it that.

Since asking nicely didn't work, Tal'Aura squared her shoulders, closed her eyes and when she opened them a moment later, they were no longer the intelligent brown that her people recognised, but the red of pure evil. **'The Vorta will see me, now!'**

Both Jem'Hadar dropped to their knees and said in deep throaty tones, 'The Pah-Wraiths are wise in all things.'

'Announce my presence,' she ordered.

The creatures rose and opened the door.

'I thought I wasn't to be disturbed?' Weyoun asked from his chair behind the desk before he noticed Tal'Aura's eyes and pushed the chair back, dropping to his knees.

'Stand,' she ordered and the Vorta obeyed.

The Jem'Hadar stepped quickly from the room.

'How may I serve you?'

'There have been rumours of a Prophet in the vicinity of the wormhole. It cannot be allowed to enter the Celestial Temple.'

Weyoun frowned. 'We are tracking six Founders to the Romulan homeworld. Surely they are of greater concern.'

'The Founders can be dealt with in time, but the Prophet must not be allowed to reach the Temple gates. Adjust course immediately.'

'Tal'Aura, this is my ship, do not presume to order me about on it. We cannot divert even a single ship to track down some nebulous spirit.'

He suddenly dropped to his knees and went into mild convulsions.

'Do not forget who gave you the means to overthrow your former Gods. You will obey.'

'My life is yours,' he replied by rote and the convulsions stopped. Weyoun touched a control on his desk. 'Return to the anomaly, maximum speed. Open a channel to the lead warship.'

'I will obey,' the Jem'Hadar First answered.

'Is there a problem?' Eris asked as her image appeared on screen.

'No, follow my previous instructions. Make orbit around Remus and wait for our return.'

'I will obey,' Eris replied and the screen blanked.

'You will inform me when we reach the Celestial Temple,' the Pah-wraith replied and exited the chamber.

As she walked down the corridor, her eyes faded to the normal brown and she leaned against a bulkhead for support. Tal'Aura shook her head and wondered what the hell was happening to her. She was beginning to feel less and less like herself every day, and seemed to be blacking out more than she ever used to. As a child she would black out whenever she got angry and even the most expensive doctors had been able to find nothing wrong with her. She had been given something to help with the headache afterwards, but over the last few months she found herself blacking out for longer periods and finding herself in unfamiliar places.

None of the Jem'Hadar said anything to her as she passed, they barely even acknowledged her presence and when they did it was to sneer and ask her to meet the Vorta leader, Weyoun. He was asking to see her less and less at the moment which meant that it was difficult for her to act as the Romulan representative to the Vorta Imperium. Tal'Aura reached her assigned quarters and realised that she couldn't remember if she'd spoken to the Vorta leader about her misgivings. She shook her head and realised that she must have done since she was leaving his chamber when she woke up.

She felt a subtle change in the orientation of the ship and realised they were turning, heading back the way they came, back toward the wormhole and the rebel station. Maybe the Vorta was going to destroy it, was that what she suggested? She couldn't remember. Definitely time to take another dose. As she reached the head, and plugged an ampoule into the dispenser, she noticed that the lines on her face were deeper than they had been. The stress of her new position was clearly getting to her. Her throat felt raw and she took a glass of water from the replicator to cool it down, but it didn't help.

She took another look at herself in the mirror. 'What is happening to me? Why

am I feeling so awful?’

She saw her eyes flash red and knew immediately what had happened. Her trip through the wormhole had not been entirely without incident. It had awakened something inside her, something that was even now subsuming her personality.

‘Well done, Romulan,’ the Pah-wraith said through her mouth. **‘When I’m finished with the Alliance, your people will be next. The galaxy will be ours and all its petty races will worship us as their gods.’**

‘Never!’ she shot back but felt her resolve weaken. ‘I will fight you until my dying breath.’

‘You will not succeed; I have had millennia to prepare for this invasion. You can do nothing to stop me.’

‘I will fight!’

‘You will lose,’ the Pah-wraith said and forced Tal’Aura’s consciousness deep inside. **‘Finally, I can fulfil my destiny.’**

Chapter One

USS Pytheas

Docked at *Terok Nor*

May 25, 2378 (Stardate 55395.6)

Captain Astar, Aaron Wright and Sheena Gonzales had entered the rebel stronghold they knew as *Deep Space Nine* in their universe and with Smiley's permission went straight for Ops, where the current rebel leadership resided. Over the last day or so, Smiley had given Astar a brief history of the last two years, and it wasn't pleasant. The Alliance had conquered a number of unaligned worlds and destroyed any planet which showed rebellion, leading the rebellion to go underground, except for the shining beacon of *Terok Nor* and what remained of the Bajoran people. Astar wasn't sure what to make of the stories but if the Vorta of this universe were being controlled by the Pah-wraiths, then they were far more dangerous than the Dominion ever were, for the wormhole aliens were the closest things to gods that currently existed. She had ordered Xeris to seal the airlock and make sure that no one entered or left the ship while she was on the station. This meeting with Smiley was a kind of strategy session, to decide what to do about getting their Wright back and maybe dealing the Imperium a crippling blow.

'How did you defeat them?' Smiley asked.

'Wright first,' Astar repeated for the fourth time. 'Once we know how we're going to get my man back, I will help you stop the Imperium.'

'Captain, may I remind you that Starfleet General Order 283 specifically prohibits any officer from assisting any political agency in the Mirror Universe, regardless of the situation.'

'Noted, Commander,' Astar replied. 'But the Imperium isn't a political agency, they are an invading force and there is an opportunity to force a detente between the rebellion and the Alliance, enabling them to pool their resources.'

'I must officially object, Captain.'

'Your objection is noted, Commander, and shall be entered into my log.'

'Aye sir.'

'About Aaron Wright, where is he likely to be?'

Smiley swallowed. 'The Alliance has become more savage in recent years and any human, or alien for that matter, who displeases Regent Martok is immediately sent to Rura Penthe.'

Astar sighed. 'The more things change...How heavily guarded is it?'

'The mines themselves are guarded, but the planet itself is not. After all, no one who escaped would have a ship to get off world.'

'So if we managed to get to Rura Penthe, we'd be able to rescue him. Commander, liaise with Lieutenant Parker and see what you can do about getting us into the mines. I'll worry about getting us there.'

'Aye sir,' the half-Betazoid replied but made no move to leave.

'Now, please.'

'Yes sir.'

Once she'd gone, Astar turned to Wright. 'You're going to help us.'

'Not a chance in hell. I'm not going anywhere near Alliance space, I've still got a brain in my head.'

Smiley tapped him on the shoulder and as Wright turned round, the general punched him in the nose, breaking it, again. 'You'll go with us, or you'll find yourself facing your ex-wife.'

Wright glared at Smiley. 'She's still alive then?'

'No thanks to you, you left her in the tender care of the Alliance when you stole that ship.'

'She was slowing me down.'

Smiley turned to Astar. 'He represents the ideals of the Terran Empire that we left behind more than a century ago.'

'We'll keep him on a tight leash, I promise. But once we're ready to go, he's all yours,' the Trill captain replied, scowling at the traitor.

Wright sighed and tried to head for the turbolift, but he was stopped by a tall man with a Bajoran rifle.

'Don't move,' he said.

Wright walked around him and felt himself hauled back into his previous position.

'Aaron, meet Kol, he doesn't like you.'

'The feeling is mutual.'

'About the Imperium?' Smiley asked, 'since you know what you're doing about your man and getting him out of the hands of the Alliance.'

'We didn't defeat them as such,' Astar told him. 'Odo cured the Founders of a disease and agreed to join the Great Link, and in return the Dominion returned to Gamma Quadrant.'

'So you can't help me?'

'I didn't say that; Starfleet developed several weapons against the Dominion and several defences against their weapons. I will freely give you that information, if you tell me the truth about the Imperium.'

Smiley nodded, grim-faced. 'It was Intendant Ro. She knew about the wormhole aliens from your universe's Major Kira and three years ago she entered the wormhole to negotiate with them. Instead, she found the Pah-wraiths and they inhabited her body. Under their influence she found the Imperium and infected them with the Pah-wraiths, then returned to our side and was killed immediately by a Romulan.'

'This Romulan, wouldn't be Tal'Aura would it?'

'I don't know who she was, all I know is that she negotiated with a Vorta warship and our troubles began. The Romulans believe in their own superiority and while the Alliance has been focused on eradicating the galaxy of the Terrans, the Romulans have been slowly annexing Klingon systems. The Vorta tried to get us to join them against the Alliance but I recognise trouble when I see it.'

Astar nodded and then saw a lithe young Trill arrive in Ops. 'Smiley, we've got trouble.'

'What is it, Ezri?'

'The Imperial flagship is headed our way, at maximum warp.'

'Damn, we have to leave,' the general said, a number of emotions warring within him. 'Ezri, sound the evacuation alarm. We have to be gone before the ship arrives.'

'We can't evacuate everyone, the *Defiant* isn't big enough.'

'The *Pytheas* can help,' Astar said. 'But you need to go to a safe haven.'

'We have one, we've been prepared for this for three years,' he replied as the station went to white alert

'Astar to *Pytheas*.'

'Go ahead, Captain,' Gonzales said.

'Open the airlock and stand by for refugees, we're evacuating the station.'

'Acknowledged, Gonzales out.'

'Where are we going?'

'The Badlands, I hope your ship can navigate the plasma storms.'

'The *Intrepid*-class starships are designed for high-maneuvrability.'

'Good, you'll need it.'

Chapter Two

USS Pytheas

Docked at *Terok Nor*

May 25, 2378 (Stardate 55395.7)

Lieutenant K'Tyra Parker, the Klingon-human security chief aboard the *Pytheas*, had shelved her plans to rescue the real Aaron Wright and instead was herding frightened refugees aboard the starship in groups of ten to twenty, handing them off to her security or engineering personnel to put in quarters, cargo bays and shuttlebays. According to the scans that Gonzales had taken, the Imperial flagship would be in range in less than half an hour, and there were hundreds of people on the station as well as all their supplies. Parker had tasked every available transporter operator to grab supplies and store them wherever there was room. General O'Brien's *Defiant* was doing the same, to a smaller degree, and two Bajoran vessels which had survived the last attack by the Klingon-Cardassian Alliance.

'How are we doing?' Astar asked as she stopped by.

'We've about reached our limit of five hundred evacuees and we're bringing the last of the supplies aboard now.'

'All right, get back up to the bridge and prepare the ship for launch. Have Larson plot the most direct course for the Badlands.'

'Let's hope these Badlands treat us better than the Triangle.'

Astar smiled. 'Compared to the Kursican Triangle, the Cardassian Badlands are a piece of cake. Larson shouldn't have any trouble handling the plasma storms.'

'Captain, what are you going to do about a first officer?'

'What do you mean?'

'Aaron Wright won't have the experience to act as your exec, and unless you shuffle the senior staff, you'll be a man short.'

'That's not your concern, Lieutenant. You're needed on the bridge.'

'Aye sir.'

Astar stood in the gangway until Parker walked away then sealed the ship and headed for engineering. Parker took the turbolift to the bridge, hoping that while they were busy helping the mirror universe, the Cha'lav didn't attack *Starbase 535* and destroy everything they had worked to protect. This was the mission she had been sent back to deal with.

She walked down to Larson and explained what Astar wanted to do.

'I've piloted through the Badlands before, Lieutenant. My father took me out there just after Starfleet took over *Deep Space Nine*, before the Maquis stuff started.'

'Right then, so plot us a direct course, making sure it's different to the Bajoran vessels and the *Defiant*.'

'The Bajoran ships have already left the station, Lieutenant. The *Defiant* is getting ready to leave as well.'

Astar arrived on the bridge and took her chair. 'Status?'

'Helm is ready.'

'Tactical ready, shields are up and weapons are hot.'

'All stations report ready,' Parker said finally, taking the science officer's seat. Lieutenant Malling was in the main science lab looking over Commander Wright's handiwork.

'Detach mooring clamps and back us away, thrusters only.'

'Aye sir,' Larson replied. 'Mooring clamps released, thrusters at one third.'

The *Pytheas* moved steadily sideward until they were several ship widths from the station, then increased to half impulse.

'Captain, we're being hailed by the *Defiant*.'

'On screen.'

'*Captain, please lead the convoy into the Badlands, we'll follow momentarily.*'

'General, you cannot hope to destroy the flagship,' Astar said, immediately guessing his intentions.'

'I haven't got everyone off yet,' the Irishman said a little more sharply than he intended. 'The Pah-wraith controlling that vessel need to sense us leave, otherwise we'll have destroyed the station for nothing.'

'I'm assuming that *Terok Nor* is almost defenceless?'

'Against this enemy, yes. Please, Captain, go now.'

Astar glared at the man and then sighed in resignation. 'Ensign, plot a course for the Badlands, best possible speed.'

'Aye sir, increasing speed to full impulse until we clear the Bajoran system.'

'What is he hiding?' Parker muttered to herself as she watched the Imperial flagship bear down on the small warship on a tactical plot. She began entering commands into the console and then paused momentarily before making active scans. 'Captain, I know what he's doing.'

'Well?'

'I scanned for the same energy signature that the wormhole aliens give off when they are "communing" with us lesser beings. There is something on the station that could be a Prophet, and is probably the reason why the flagship is heading this way.'

'He's protecting a Prophet so it can enter the wormhole and kick out the Pah-wraiths? Ensign, reverse course.'

'Sir?' Larson and Gonzales said in unison.

'We have to protect the refugees,' Parker added. 'We are their only hope for survival.'

Astar grimaced. Her crew had become far more mutinous in the last couple of weeks. 'Remain on course, time to the Badlands?'

'Three days at warp two, Captain, the Bajoran ships can't travel any faster than that.'

'I don't remember the Badlands being that far from *Deep Space Nine*,' Astar said as she consulted the readouts on the console by her chair.

'The route isn't as well travelled in this universe, Captain, so there isn't a space lane to make the journey faster,' Larson replied.

'I suppose your father taught you all about the subspace topography of the galaxy?'

'Yes sir.'

'The Imperial flagship has dropped out of warp,' Gonzales informed them.

'On screen.'

The flagship looked similar to its other universe counterpart, but the weaponry was far more extensive. Neither the *Defiant* nor the station would be able to stand up to it. Gonzales confirmed that a moment later.

'They don't stand a chance. That ship has six phased polaron cannons and eleven plasma torpedo launchers. *Terok Nor* doesn't have the Starfleet upgrades that *Deep Space Nine* has and will be unable to withstand the attack.'

'How many people are still on the station?' Astar asked.

'We're too far away now for an accurate reading.'

'Use the astrometrics sensors.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales said and entered a string of commands. 'I'm reading two distinct lifesigns, one human and one Prophet, and they're close together.'

'How long until the flagship is in range?'

'Thirty seconds.'

'Is there nothing we can do?' Larson asked.

In answer to his question, polaron beams streaked out from the flagship and hit the station's shield generators which were vaporised instantly, along with sections of the central core. The *Defiant* suddenly shot off into warp.

‘Ensign, follow them, maximum warp.’

Chapter Three

Shuttlecraft *Lowell*

The Kursican sector (Our universe)

Stardate 55395.8 (May 25, 2378)

Murdoch had ignored the continuing hails from *Starbase 535* and he avoided what few patrol routes there were and it wasn't long before he was in uncharted space since Ynelav IV was no longer a viable option. The *Lowell* had everything he could possibly cram into its library, and still the star charts were no help. Seated in the co-pilot's chair, Linnis was silently watching the stars streak by at warp and suddenly turned to him, her eyes wide in alarm.

'Adjust course, there's a ship approaching.'

Murdoch looked at his sensors. 'There's nothing out there.'

'You'll see it soon, but you need to change course.'

'Any particular direction?'

'The Delta Quadrant, we need to go to the Delta Quadrant.'

Murdoch sighed and tapped out a sequence on the panel in front of him. 'All right, we're now heading for the Delta Quadrant. I have to warn you though, I hope we're not going too far. We have enough provisions for maybe three months but no more, and this shuttlecraft is not for missions of such long duration.'

'Supplies are not a problem,' she replied knowingly. 'I know where we can stock up at regular intervals. I told you, you don't have to worry.'

Murdoch smiled at the thought of being told not to worry by what looked to be a ten-year-old girl, but she had already said she was two years old by her species' reckoning. Very little in the galaxy surprised him anymore but he was still a little annoyed that he was essentially being led around with no idea where he was supposed to go.

'I told you where we're going,' she said, replying directly to his thoughts. 'The Delta Quadrant.'

'What are we doing in the Delta Quadrant?'

Linnis sighed. 'We're going to find some friends of mine who can help us stop the bad men.'

That made Murdoch sit up. 'What bad men?'

'The bad men who kidnapped those people and tried to kill the dog men.'

'The Cha'lav?'

'Yes,' she nodded, lowering her head as if in memorial. 'I know people that can help us defeat the Cha'lav, but they live a long way from here.'

'So how are we going to get there and back in time?'

'We'll get help and get back in time to help.'

'How?' Murdoch asked.

'Uh oh,' she said. 'The other ship found us.'

The proximity alarm wailed and Murdoch looked at the sensor readings. 'I don't recognise this configuration. There's nothing like it in the library computer.'

Linnis looked at the sensor logs too. 'It looks like an Akishi ship, but the forward part is wrong.'

'Akishi? Aren't they part of the Ynelavii Cooperative?'

The Ocampo snorted. 'As long as it benefits them, but it is unusual to find them this far from their own territory, if it is them.'

'We're being hailed, so I guess we'll find out.'

The image on the forward monitor changed to that of a slender alien form which resembled an Earth rose. The alien spoke but it took a few repetitions for the universal translator to kick in and decipher the language.

'You will hand over the telepath or be destroyed.'

This time, Murdoch snorted. 'This girl is under my protection. What has she

done to harm you?'

'Her kind, and those like her, ruled this part of the galaxy centuries ago. Two hundred years ago we overthrew the telepaths and took control of our own destiny. They refused to leave our territory and we hunted them down. She is one of only a handful left.'

'I can't let you take her. We're leaving this area of space.'

'You may leave, if you do not return,' the alien said.

'We will not be returning here,' Linnis told her. 'I don't like it here.'

The alien woman smiled. *'As well you shouldn't. Your kind are not welcome here, little one.'*

Murdoch cut the channel as he noticed Linnis' eyes getting narrower. 'Don't hurt them. They are acting out of fear and hatred. You're better than that.'

She jumped up and headed into the aft compartment. The *Flyer*-class shuttlecraft was more than large enough for the two of them, especially as they had so little in the way of personal items. Murdoch watched the alien ship vanish as if enveloped in a cloaking field but the sensors didn't identify it as such. It was there one moment and gone the next as if it had never existed in the first place.

He resumed their previous course, for the Delta Quadrant, and called up what Admiral Nechayev had been kind enough to give him. Everything on the Ocampa came from Captain-now-Admiral Janeway of *Voyager*, and it wasn't much. Kes had provided as much information as she could about her people but their distant past was a mystery as was the Caretaker's mate, Suspiria. Janeway was sure that there were other Ocampa colonies but she had no proof and after Kes evolved into a new lifeform, Janeway could do nothing about proving it. There may well be other colonies but Janeway's short cut home through the Borg transwarp network meant that there was still large swathes of the Delta Quadrant that were still unexplored.

He reasoned that Linnis was taking him to one of these colonies, or at least somewhere or to someone that had a lot of firepower.

'Not quite,' he heard her muffled response.

'Are you reading my mind again?'

'Yes, but if you want me to stop you need to improve your mental shields.'

'I didn't know humans had mental shields,' he said, putting the ship on autopilot.

'Everybody does, they just have to learn to use them.'

'Can you teach me how to strengthen them?' he asked as he moved into the aft compartment.

'I can but it will take time,' she replied with a smile.

'We appear to have plenty of it.'

'First, you need to lock away memories you don't want people to see if they do get into your head. Everyone can do that.'

'I work in Intelligence, we're trained to do that.'

'Let's see,' she said and began probing his mind.

Chapter Four

USS Pytheas

Bajoran system

May 25, 2378 (Stardate 55395.8)

Captain Leza Astar watched in near-horror as *Terok Nor* exploded, sections blasting apart all at once. It made her thankful that Starfleet had made the necessary upgrades to *Deep Space Nine* otherwise the same might be said of their own station. On her tactical screen, she saw the flagship begin to move again, adjusting its course for a direct line toward the Badlands. She sighed and waited for her tactical officer to inform her of the fact.

‘Captain, the flagship is headed our way at warp nine-point-four, and I’ve just run a simulation on our weapons’ effectiveness.’

Astar moved up to her position and spoke sotto voce. ‘Commander, I don’t know what Wright let you get away with while he was in command and to be honest I’m not sure I want to know, but I am in command now and you will follow orders. I expect to be notified the moment something happens, not seconds later once you have run simulations. Is that understood?’

Chastened, Gonzales nodded. ‘Yes sir.’

‘All right, what have you got?’

‘The flagship’s weapons are superior to those of the Dominion, and our weapons are no match for that ship’s offensive capability. We would lose.’

Astar appeared to consider her options. ‘Speak with Xeris and see if you do anything to channel more power into the phasers. I would also suggest that you work on a way to make the shields somewhat stronger. I didn’t like the way that polaron beam sliced through the station’s shields.’

‘Aye sir, I’ll get on it right away.’

Astar strolled across the bridge the Andorian operations officer, who seemed a little ill at ease. ‘Is there a problem, Lieutenant?’

‘No sir, I’m glad to see you back on your feet.’

‘Talen, I know there is something wrong, tell me.’

'Something doesn't feel right, almost like we're being manipulated somehow.'

'By the Prophets?'

He shrugged. 'Possibly, I'm not up on my Bajoran spirituality. But the ship doesn't feel right either. I've got a little itch right at the base of my antennae.'

Astar sighed. 'You're reading an energy signature that you can't identify, right?'

Talen's eyes widened. 'I do actually read reports and histories, Lieutenant. When that itch becomes unbearable, I want to know about it that second.'

The Andorian just nodded.

Astar smiled and then returned to her chair. 'Open a channel to the *Defiant*.'

'Channel open,' a junior security officer replied.

'General O'Brien, I know what you have on board, and I need to speak with you urgently regarding this matter.'

O'Brien's face appeared on the viewer a second later. '*This isn't secure.*'

'It will do,' Astar informed him. 'You need to be completely upfront with me on this issue. I am willing to help you only as long as you are honest with me. I don't care about your petty bickering with anyone else at this moment in time, I want to get these people to a safe haven, get my man from the Alliance and get out of here.'

'*What about the Imperium?*'

'Watch your aft scanners, they're following us into the Badlands. You and I both know that ship doesn't have the manoeuvring capabilities to do anything, but we need a contingency plan.'

'*I have one, Captain,*' O'Brien shot back, his tired face now contorted into a near grimace. '*I will not reveal it to you, even over a secure channel, but you will know it when the time is right.*'

'General, can you at least provide me with coordinates as to where we're

going?’

O’Brien smiled. *‘You should have the coordinates in your system already, Captain. After all, our universes are not that dissimilar.’*

Astar nodded. ‘And yet in other ways it is completely different. We’ll rendezvous in three days, General. Astar out.’

As the screen blanked, Astar turned to face each of her bridge officers, then decided to speak to each one of them in turn about the events leading up to her reawakening. But that would have to wait for a more appropriate time. Right now, however, she needed to get them all ready for a fight they might not be able to win.

‘Mister Larson, I want to be ready for a warp jump if we’re surprised by the Vorta in the Badlands.’

Larson turned around. ‘Captain, we can’t go to warp inside the Badlands, the best I can give you is a hyper-impulse burst.’

‘Ensign?’ Astar asked.

‘It was something I was working on before my father’s death. It involves channelling the impulse energies through the deflector dish to push the ship to eighty percent of light speed.’

‘An interesting notion, does it work in simulations?’

Larson hesitated for just a moment. ‘It works in about half the simulations with the same parameters.’

‘I see, have you run simulations using the *Pytheas*’ engines yet?’

‘Yes sir, and the chances of it succeeding are better than with even a *Defiant*-class ship. That tore itself apart.’

‘I see, well when your shift is over, I would like you to make preparations with the chief engineer. The more tricks we have up our sleeves the better.’

‘Aye sir,’ Larson replied, eager to assist and prove one of his pet theories.

‘Lieutenant Talen, I want all intruder-alert systems at maximum efficiency. I

don't want a dust mite where it doesn't belong.'

'I'm already on it, Captain. All internal sensors will be operating at maximum, and all forcefields will be fully operational when needed. I will liaise with Commander Xeris regarding the structural integrity field.'

Astar nodded. 'Right then,' she said, seeing that even though her crew had put up with a homicidal maniac for a commander for a couple of weeks, they were still at the top of their game. 'Time for a little action, I think.'

She activated a program from her console and then entered a sequence of commands, inputting requests, then toggled the intraship communication system. 'All hands to battle stations. Repeat, all hands to battle stations.'

Chapter Five

USS Pytheas

Approaching the Badlands

May 27, 2378 (Stardate 55401.9)

Lieutenant Commander Xeris scowled at the results the captain had just delivered to him. His engineers had performed below expectations during the drills over the last two days and he was going to have to read them the riot act. To add insult to injury, his cache of weapons had been confiscated and would be recycled through the replicator system, but the captain had allowed him to keep eight items. It was a tough choice but he had a way to get around it, provided certain members of the crew were amenable to it. He muttered a curse and tossed the padd onto his desk, striding out of his office with an expression reminiscent of Zeus prior to the throwing of a thunderbolt.

Xeris paused by the warp core and bellowed. 'In a line, now!'

Twenty-three engineers scurried into view from across two engineering levels and various Jeffries tubes and held themselves in a line.

'Now listen up, I've been a little lenient on you recently, and you've been slacking. This isn't a Corps of Engineers' ship where you can come and go as you please until the next trouble spot shows up. From now on, you'll show up for your shift ten minutes early for a roll call, and the first person who's late gets a week in waste reclamation. Now get back to your duties, dismissed.'

He turned round and returned to his office to think of ways of torturing his engineers when Gonzales' voice resounded through the intraship comm system. 'All senior officers report to the bridge. We are approaching the Badlands. I repeat, all senior officers to the bridge.'

'Great, just great,' he muttered. 'Queran, get your Xindi butt out here.'

'Sir?' the Xindi-Arboreal deputy chief engineer answered the summons.

'I'm going to the bridge and I will monitor things from up there. I want you to be ready to deal with anything that arises. If I call down I want you to do what I tell you straight away, no matter how bizarre it sounds.'

She nodded. 'Yes sir.'

‘Good, engineering’s all yours.’

Xeris made his way quickly to the bridge but was still the last one there. All the other senior officers, except the non-existent first officer, were present already. Astar indicated that they should all take their positions and they did so. He moved to the engineering station on the starboard side of the bridge and opened a link with Queran, who was ready to receive instructions.

‘Ensign, how close are we?’ Astar asked.

‘Forty million kilometres and closing,’ Larson replied.

‘Slow to impulse and prepare to follow the convoy inside.’

‘Aye sir.’

‘Captain, the evacuees are following the *Defiant* into the Badlands. Six minutes until the flagship intercepts,’ Gonzales added.

‘The plasma storms are particularly intense in this region, Captain,’ Xeris interjected. ‘I’m strengthening the structural integrity fields and channelling some warp energy into the shield grid. It should provide a small measure of extra protection.’

Astar nodded, watching the viewscreen as the seven convoy vessels began to separate to wind their way through the plasma storms.

Xeris glanced at Larson who had called up a storm plot on his console which showed the plasma needles, the convoy and the *Defiant*. He smiled at the young man’s ingenuity and continued to adjust the engines.

‘The last convoy ship has entered the Badlands, flagship intercept in two minutes.’

Astar didn’t need to be reminded. ‘Ensign, take us in, one half impulse.’

‘Aye sir, one half impulse.’

‘Ensign, I’m projecting an optimal course onto your screen now. It’ll automatically update with the new information from the astrometrics lab,’ Gonzales informed Larson.

Larson just nodded his head.

Xeris looked around and noticed that he hadn't seen Lieutenant Malling, the new senior science officer. She must be down in the astrometrics lab, lucky woman. It was one of the few pieces of technology that he wasn't completely familiar with, and it rankled him. Mahtani, Elements rest his soul, didn't let him anywhere near it and he hoped that Malling might be more amenable to it.

'The flagship is now entering the Badlands,' Gonzales said.

'Shields?'

'Shields at maximum,' Xeris replied. 'But the plasma storms are interfering with them somewhat.'

'To what degree?' Gonzales asked.

He looked at her like she was questioning his abilities. 'Like the Vorta might get off a lucky shot and hit something vital. The shields are buckling in various spots at random intervals.'

'Is it serious?' Talen asked.

'Only if we get hit,' Xeris replied sardonically.

The Andorian's antennae stood straight up but Xeris ignored the feelings of anger directed at him.

'The flagship is approaching on an assault vector, it looks like it's aiming for the convoy,' Gonzales forced everyone's attention back to the matter at hand.

'Adjust our course to block them, Ensign,' Astar ordered.

'Aye sir, adjusting course to 312 mark 194,' Larson muttered as he made the correction.

'The flagship is increasing speed, fifty-six percent impulse.'

'Match them.'

'Captain, I do not recommend full impulse in the Badlands. The intake

manifolds will become clogged if we're unable to clear them fast enough,' Xeris added.

'The flagship is still increasing, now at sixty-three percent impulse.'

'Put us directly in their path, Ensign. That convoy must be protected.'

'Aye sir.'

Xeris watched the look that passed between Gonzales and the Andorian and sighed. He knew that they were thinking Astar's behaviour was erratic and that more action might need to be taken, but there was nothing he could do without tipping anyone off.

'Captain, we're being hailed,' Gonzales said, seemingly shocked, but only Xeris could read her that well.

'Finally, on screen.'

'You are interfering in an internal political matter,' Weyoun spoke with the same obsequious tone she'd heard from the feeds during the war in their universe.

'The Vorta do not belong on this side of the wormhole,' Astar replied. 'Why don't you go back to your side?'

Weyoun narrowed his eyes, looked off the screen for a second and then nodded. *'It has been decreed that you be destroyed.'*

The screen blanked.

'They're firing!' Gonzales screeched as the polaron beam slammed into the shields.

Chapter Six

USS Pytheas

The Badlands

May 27, 2378 (Stardate 55402.0)

Consoles across the bridge sparked and died, the lights flickered and came back on dimmer than before and the ship shook as the shields absorbed an awesome amount of energy. Gonzales maintained her station only by bending over double and clutching the tactical station as if it were an errant child. As the ship righted itself she anticipated her captain's order and threw auxiliary backup into the shields. The lights came on full again as Queran and Hu'fret did their jobs. She heard Xeris mutter a curse and yell orders down to engineering while Larson and Talen regained their stations and began coordinating with their departments.

'Status of the convoy?' Astar asked.

'Beyond the range of the flagship,' Gonzales answered.

'Get us out of here before they fire again.'

'Aye sir, the flagship is following us deeper into the Badlands.'

'Let them,' Larson muttered. 'They'll never manoeuvre like we can.'

'That's enough, Ensign. Gonzales, fire a couple of torpedoes back at them. Hopefully it will slow them down long enough for us to get away.'

'Aye sir, firing.'

'Status of the ship?'

'A few fried circuits, but nothing my engineers can't fix,' Xeris replied. 'But I wouldn't recommend getting hit a second time. We're likely to lose structural integrity in places. That beam caused an extensive power drain on our systems.'

'Noted, Commander. Gonzales?'

'Direct hit to their forward shields. No damage to their hull.'

'Captain, it seems that the Imperium's polaron beams are more powerful against our shields here,' Talen said, 'but not because of their general strength.'

'Explain?' Astar asked, moving toward his station.

'Because our ship, and everything about it, has a different quantum signature, the polaron beam interacts with our shields in a different way. It is in fact the only reason our shields stayed intact. Were we the *Defiant*, the shields would have failed.'

Astar sighed and changed direction for the tactical console. 'Can we give O'Brien shield enhancements without violating General Order 283?'

Gonzales shook her head. 'I'd recommend against it, Captain. When we're gone, the rebels could use whatever we give them against others in the quadrant and bring about a second Terran Empire.'

'I don't think that'll happen, Commander. General O'Brien seems to have been influenced by our side's Captain Sisko and the others from *Deep Space Nine* who made it here. He genuinely wants to move forward and not make the same mistakes that his people have made in the past.'

'Do you believe you can get the rebels and the Alliance to work together?'

Astar shrugged. 'They have no choice in the matter. Either they work together or they die. Since the Romulans are also involved, one must also be vigilant of treachery, although I fear it is the same situation that Cardassia was in. The Romulans probably believe that the Imperium can offer them a larger stake in galactic politics, but when the chips are down I think they'll be betrayed and will lash out.'

'Against whom? Those who betrayed them or those who did nothing in their eyes to help them?' Talen asked.

'Regardless, I don't want to be here when that final chapter happens. As long as we can get Regent Martok and General O'Brien to the negotiating table, I'll consider my work here done. Then we'll be able to rescue Wright and get back to our own universe.'

'I would suggest that we attempt both at once,' Gonzales said. 'If Martok was to find out we violated Alliance space after negotiating a truce, he will feel

betrayed. We have to take Wright from under his nose while he's distracted by the negotiations.'

'That could also backfire.'

'Then we flee. We have the ability to go home at any time.'

Astar nodded. 'Where is that ship?'

'Still on an intercept course but holding steady at sixty-nine percent impulse power. We're at seventy-four percent and slowly pulling ahead.'

'The convoy?'

'Still on course for the target planet.'

'Are we going to leave the refugees on that planet when we leave?'

'That's the idea. No unnecessary casualties.'

'Captain, we're being hailed by the flagship.'

'On screen.'

Once again, Weyoun's face appeared on the viewscreen, but he was not smiling. '*Your defensive systems are capable of withstanding our attack, how?*'

Astar hid a grin of her own. 'Do you really think that we entered this universe without the means to defend ourselves? You'll find our offensive systems quite capable as well, Weyoun. And you tell your Romulan masters that the rest of the fleet will be availing themselves of our technology.'

Weyoun looked off screen to receive instructions and then cut the channel.

'Well that didn't go as planned,' Astar muttered.

'Sir?' Talen called out. 'The flagship is adjusting course.'

'Where are they heading?'

'To the *Defiant*,' he replied, tying his console in to the astrometrics lab.

'Xeris, I'm going to need as much impulse power as you can give me,' she turned to her chief engineer.

'I'll be in engineering.'

'Mister Larson, coordinate with engineering for your hyper-impulse theory. It may be the only way to prevent an atrocity.'

'Aye sir, can I suggest an additional manoeuvre?'

'Go ahead.'

'We may be able to use the warp engines to generate a plasma needle, and the flagship would be caught in its throes.'

'It's worth a try, permission granted.'

Astar settled back into her seat and looked to her left where the first officer's seat sat empty. As Larson and Xeris called out their orders and recommendations, she considered the possibilities of recruiting from within. As second officer, Gonzales was the logical choice to replace Wright but Astar didn't think that the tactical officer was ready for the posting. She would put forward her recommendation and the subsequent shuffle of senior staff and junior officers to Starfleet Command when they returned to their universe, along with an alternate possibility of assigning a new officer to the ranks of the *Pytheas* from elsewhere within the fleet.

'Captain, we're ready,' Larson said.

Chapter Seven

USS *Pytheas*

The Badlands

May 27, 2378 (Stardate 55402.1)

Astar moved to stand behind Larson and put a hand on his shoulder. 'Turn us around, Ensign, and let's make this work.'

The *Pytheas* slowed and turned before increasing speed and barrelling toward the flagship on what was clearly an intercept course. Larson held the ship on course and his hands were a blur as he adjusted the feeds coming to his screen from engineering.

'Xeris, prepare the deflector dish for the plasma burst. I'm going to need the hyper-impulse manifold online in the next two minutes if we're going to pull this off.'

'Acknowledged, Ensign,' the chief engineer replied. 'Hyper-impulse system is online, but if you blow out too many power relays, we're going to be in for a bumpy ride. Give me another minute for the deflector.'

'Captain, the flagship is powering up the polaron beam, thirty seconds before firing range,' Gonzales called out.

'The shields will hold,' Xeris replied, the open comm line to engineering providing him entry into the bridge's happenings.

'Keep her steady, Ensign.'

'Aye sir, now approaching optimal distance. Xeris, you ready?'

'Deflector modifications are online, you're clear to go.'

Larson entered a sequence of commands on his console and a burst of warp plasma channelled through the ship's deflector impacted the lower band of the Badlands' plasma field. The plasma ignited and a needle quickly rose ahead of them up as the two starships approached each other.

The flagship was closer to the needle and tried to veer off, but it was too large to manoeuvre quickly and the port nacelle was shorn off, spinning away into the Badlands before exploding quietly. The *Pytheas* threaded the needle's gap

and let loose a volley of torpedoes before turning back toward the convoy.

'Direct hits, their shields are gone and they're venting oxygen,' Gonzales crowed.

'Are they pursuing?'

'No sir, they're turning back.'

Astar sighed and Larson turned to face her. 'They'll be back, we've only been granted a reprieve. As long as we make sure the planetoid isn't found, the civilians will be safe and we can leave the Badlands to complete our objectives.'

'Well said, Ensign. How far behind the convoy are we?'

'Nearly forty minutes, Captain,' Talen replied.

'Engage hyper-impulse drive,' Astar ordered.

Larson turned back to the flight control console and began to increase the ship's speed. 'Increasing to full impulse, point-six light speed,' he said.

The ship shook a little.

'Xeris, increase power to the structural integrity field.'

'It's already fifteen percent beyond maximum, Captain. I'm not sure I can get much more out of it.'

'Point-six-two light speed...point-six-eight...'

The ship began to shudder more violently. 'Inertial dampers are redlining,' Gonzales said, struggling to hold on.

'I'm redirecting the warp plasma flow to inertial dampers and structural integrity.'

'Was the ship designed to withstand that?'

'No, but we are supposed to be protecting the convoy.'

'Commander, I don't want you destroying the ship. With the Vorta flagship out of commission, the convoy should be safe enough,' Astar told him.

'Aye Captain, let's hope the Alliance has no idea we're here,' the engineer shot back.

Astar agreed with the sentiment. 'If we redline, power down to normal levels.'

'Aye sir.'

'Mister Larson, keep going.'

'Yes ma'am,' point-seven-three light speed,' he replied as the shuddering levelled out.

Astar realised that Xeris had dumped a significant amount of power into systems that weren't designed to handle it, but as long as it held for long enough, she'd put a commendation in their files for original thinking. She felt the ship surge ahead as the inertial dampers whined in protest. The vessel was not designed to sustain these speeds at impulse.

'Hull integrity down to ninety-three percent,' Talen called out.

Astar scowled. 'Ship's status?'

'Structural integrity down to ninety-one percent and holding, inertial dampers at eighty-six percent and holding, and shields are at maximum,' Gonzales replied.

'How far behind the convoy are we?'

'Eleven minutes.'

'Point-seven-five light speed,' Larson interrupted.

'Captain, why aren't we using warp speeds?' Talen asked, his lack of knowledge apparent.

'The plasma storms wreak havoc with warp fields,' Xeris answered from engineering. *'Not even Voyager was able to go to warp in the Badlands.'*

'Captain, ship approaching from an oblique angle!' Gonzales said, cutting off

the conversation.

‘Identify.’

‘It reads as Cardassian, *Galor*-class, an Alliance heavy cruiser.’

Astar sighed. ‘Course?’

‘It is on course to intercept the convoy, Captain. At its present speed, it will reach the convoy before they reach the planet.’

‘How the hell did we not see that?’

‘They’ve probably got cloaks,’ Gonzales replied, ‘being allied with the Klingons and all.’

‘Very likely, Commander.’

‘Point-seven-seven light speed,’ Larson said. ‘I don’t want to push it much more, Captain.’

‘Time to intercept the Alliance ship?’

‘Five minutes at current speed,’ the helmsman replied.

Astar glanced at the lights around the bridge, set at red alert and knew for a certainty that this was not going to end well.

‘Open a channel to the cruiser.’

‘Aye sir,’ Gonzales replied. ‘Channel open.’

‘This is Captain Leza Astar of the Federation starship *Pytheas*. Identify yourselves.’

A very familiar and unwelcome face appeared on the main viewscreen and Astar held in a shudder of revulsion. ‘*I am Gul Dukat of the Cardassian-Klingon Alliance, welcome to the mirror universe, Captain.*’

‘Weren’t you the Head of Central Command?’

Dukat’s smile fell. ‘*Legate Damar had other plans, but that is another matter.*

Withdraw from our territory or I will be forced to destroy you.'

'I don't believe that is going to happen, Dukat. Perhaps you should return to Cardassia.'

'*One day,*' Dukat replied and cut the channel.

'He's been exiled,' Talen said, adding: 'Shame that.'

'He's probably even more dangerous in this universe than he is in our own,' Astar warned. 'How long until we're in weapons range?'

'Sixty seconds.'

'Don't fire unless he fires first.'

'Aye Captain.'

Chapter Eight

USS *Pytheas*

The Badlands

May 27, 2378 (Stardate 55402.3)

The battle with Dukat had never materialised.

The enigmatic Cardassian was still following them but making no move to attack. Astar hadn't sent a message to Smiley in case Dukat was listening in and so she just slowed the ship and waited, plodding along until the *Defiant* had seen to the safety of the colonists. It had been three hours and there had been no word as yet. Instead of pacing she had retreated into her quarters, leaving Gonzales in command of the bridge while she looked through the paperwork Wright had signed off during her forced medical leave. The reports from the senior officers had given her interesting reading and she was sure that she was now firmly in command again without any issues outstanding.

'Come,' she said when her door chimed.

'Captain, it would appear that the colonists have made it safely. We picked up the *Defiant* for a few seconds before it cloaked again,' Gonzales told her. 'We're ready to go into Alliance space.'

Astar nodded. 'Are all the repairs complete?'

'Xeris is still fiddling with the structural integrity field, but other than that we're as good as new.'

'All right, have Larson set a course for Rura Penthe. We'll rendezvous with the *Defiant* and then make our way. The less time we spend in this universe the better.'

'Captain, we're receiving a hail from General O'Brien,' Larson informed her over the comm.

'Put it through.'

'Captain, I see you have company.'

'Is Dukat a big a pain in your universe as he is in ours?'

O'Brien shrugged. *'He has his moments, but I must warn you. If he has decided that he wants the Pytheas, he'll do anything to get it.'*

'Then he's out of luck. We're ready to get our man back, will you be joining us?'

'I don't have a station to go back to, and I'm itching to give the Alliance another crippling blow. I'd love to reduce that frozen wasteland to slag.'

'You would have an easier time getting into Alliance space than we would, but I would welcome any help you could provide.'

'I have an idea.'

'I'm listening.'

'Take Dukat's cloaking device.'

Astar chuckled. 'Are you insane?'

'I know where it is and how to get it, without being discovered.'

Gonzales nodded and Astar stared at her. 'Rendezvous with us and we'll discuss the plan.'

'Excellent, see you in a few hours, Captain.'

Astar sighed. 'What have we gotten ourselves into, Commander?'

'Sir, our best hope of evading the hundreds of ships between here and Rura Penthe is to arrive under cloak. We can cripple Dukat's ship, take the cloak and by the time he's able to warn anyone, we'll be long gone, maybe even home.'

'It's still a very risky gambit, so much can go wrong and we don't have any backup.'

'I do understand the risk, sir, but as the Ferengi say, "the riskier the road, the greater the profit." Who knows how many others from our side are being held captive here.'

'He'll need extensive counselling once we get him back,' Astar said, changing subjects slightly. 'I want you research his life exhaustively and prepare a holodeck simulation to assist in his recovery. Liaise with Counsellor Zayner to provide the right balance.'

'Aye sir, I'd like to be in the away team that acquires the cloak.'

'I was going to ask you to lead it.'

'Thank you, Captain.'

'Dismissed.'

Once Gonzales was gone, Astar leaned back in her chair and called up what little information there was in the ship's library on the mirror universe. It wasn't much, with almost all of it classified beyond a captain's clearance level. What she could access informed her that the earliest incursion was reported to be in the twenty-second century but that was uncorroborated. Kirk transported into the mirror universe during his historic five year mission and then the common crossovers centred on *Deep Space Nine*, where the barrier between the universes was said to be the weakest.

It would be about five hours before Smiley O'Brien caught up with them to go over a plan to steal Dukat's cloak, and she decided to get some sleep during the downtime as she was running low on energy. As she rose from the chair, she clutched her abdomen and collapsed, having just enough strength to call sickbay before she felt consciousness ebbing.

'Careful,' Doctor Maxx said as she opened her eyes.

'What happened?' she asked, feeling weak.

'You need to get home to Trill, soon.'

'Why?'

'The symbiont is ill, and your own hormones are in dangerous flux,' he replied, waving the medical tricorder across her abdomen and head.

'Spit it out, Arlon.'

'One of your hosts has an unresolved issue and you will both continue to get

worse until you perform the Zhian'tara. I'm surprised the Symbiosis Commission hasn't pushed to have it done before now.'

'They have, but it wasn't practical to do so since I have few close friends and often work too far from Trill for a Guardian to travel.'

'Well then, as soon as we get back to our universe I'm placing you on medical leave until the Zhian'tara can be performed and the host's issues are resolved.'

'That's not necessary, Doctor.'

'Captain, I don't think you understand the gravity of your situation. If the rite isn't performed soon, both of you will die. I can offset the effects for a while, but it will require constant monitoring,' he said and knelt down. 'This will monitor the biosigns of both of you.'

Astar groaned. It was not what she needed at this moment in time. 'Thank you, Doctor.'

'If you collapse, I'll be there quickly and if it gets worse, you'll be going back into stasis again for the symbiont's safety.'

'Is that necessary?'

'Yes, in the wake of the uprising on Trill, new regulations specifically state that the symbionts are to be protected by any means necessary short of killing the host to protect it.'

Astar nodded with minimal movement, she was still weak. 'I need to be in full control of my faculties.'

'You will be, shortly.'

Chapter Nine

Starship *Defiant*

Edge of Alliance space

May 28, 2378 (Stardate 55402.9)

Lieutenant Commander Sheena Gonzales materialised in the *Defiant*'s small transporter room with Xeris and Cadet Snowcroft. General O'Brien and Aaron Wright were waiting for them. Wright did not look happy to see any of them. Gonzales stepped down, followed the other two, and stood in front of O'Brien.

'General.'

'Call me Smiley, did Dukat detect the transport?'

'No, he's too far away to detect the *Defiant* decloaking, especially with the scattering field we have in effect,' Gonzales replied.

'Good, then let's cloak the ship and give him a bloody nose.'

'You're going to get us killed,' Wright muttered.

Xeris turned toward the former Starfleet officer, stepped into his face and snarled. 'If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't be here. I suggest you don't speak to me unless you want something broken.'

'Enough, Xeris, stand down,' Gonzales said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

'You won't be welcome in this universe, the Romulans are in league with the Vorta and are usually shot on sight,' Wright added.

Gonzales' tightened her grip on Xeris as she read his surface thoughts. 'Don't.'

Smiley was under no such compunction and elbowed the man in the ribs with force. Wright was about to say something more when the doors opened and a woman entered with a look on her face which would have curdled acid.

'Aaron, so good to see you,' she said and slapped him so hard in the face that he dropped to one knee. 'I'm the chief engineer on this tub of bolts. I used to work on Galors so I know where everything is. I'll be accompanying you.'

Xeris looked at Gonzales and then back at the dusky-skinned woman. 'Who

are you?’

‘My name is Anjuna Mahtani.’

‘X and Y,’ Gonzales said with a smile.

‘What?’

‘In our universe, our Mahtani was a man, our chief science officer before that piece of scum killed him.’

Anjuna looked at Aaron who was still on the floor and kicked him in the shin, then turned to O’Brien. ‘Why is he still alive?’

‘I thought he might come in useful when we get to Rura Penthe. Swap one Aaron for another.’

Anjuna smirked. ‘I like that idea. Come along, Starfleet. I need to give you everything you’ll need to know about Dukat’s ship.’

‘We have full schematics for the Galor-class ships in our own computers.’

‘I’m sure you do, but Alliance cloaks don’t work the same as yours do.’

‘We don’t have cloaks, the *Defiant* in our universe was given one by the Romulans in exchange for information. We have a treaty in place that prevents us from using cloaking technology. Besides, in our universe, the Romulan-Klingon alliance of the early twenty-third century is the only reason that Klingons even had cloaks,’ Xeris told her as they walked to the mess hall.

‘In this universe, the Terrans stole the cloaks from the Romulans during the war in the twenty-second century, and the Klingons stole Terran cloaking devices in the twenty-third.’

‘An interesting variation. What is the difference between Terran and Alliance cloaks?’

‘The saying goes “You don’t know the Terrans are there until they decloak and fire” but Alliance cloaks aren’t as good. They can be detected.’

‘Does no one have Terran cloaks anymore?’ Xeris asked.

'There is one Terran ship that might have such a cloak, but no one has seen it in two hundred years.'

'The *Columbia*?'

'Right, the ISS *Columbia* was last seen after the Battle of Cheron following reports of an unidentified vessel in Imperial space. No one has seen the vessel since.'

'We lost our *Columbia* too, a strange coincidence.'

'Many things seem to have happened similarly in both universes,' Xeris said. 'It is interesting.'

'Grab some coffee, you'll need it,' O'Brien said with a smile. 'I'll join you in an hour or so. We'll get underway and try sticking to the underbelly of Dukat's ship.'

'Make sure to avoid any antiproton scans, that's how to get through these cloaking devices,' Gonzales said.

'Thanks.'

'Did Captain Astar give you authorisation to provide such information to these people?' Cadet Snowcroft asked.

'She told me to do whatever was necessary to secure the cloak, and making sure we live to get aboard Dukat's ship is necessary to do so,' Gonzales answered. 'Cadet, just make sure that when you fire that rifle, it's pointed at a Cardassian or Klingon.'

'We're not here to wipe out the Alliance,' Gonzales stated sternly. 'We are going to rescue our man from Rura Penthe and then return to our own universe.'

'Aren't you supposed to be helping us get rid of the Vorta Imperium?'

'We'll do our best on that, but it requires the rebellion to work with the Alliance,' Xeris told her. 'And from what I've seen so far, that isn't likely to happen.'

Anjuna bristled. 'I will do anything to get rid of them. They blew up my station

and they've killed my friends. I don't intend to let my issues with the Alliance stop me from sending the Imperium back to the Gamma Quadrant.'

'I'd like to know how,' Snowcroft said. 'What have you got that can counter them?'

'The technology you will be providing us, the ships we have been acquiring and some strategic planning.'

'First things first, we need to rescue our man from Rura Penthe, and then we can worry about the Vorta.'

'True enough,' Anjuna replied as they entered the mess hall. Several large Cardassian and Klingon padds were arrayed on the tables. 'Let's get started.'

The four of them leaned over the padds and began making notes on the best routes to engineering and diversions, and how fast the cloaking device could be deactivated, unhooked and then beamed out. Snowcroft was asking a lot of questions, but Gonzales knew she was only doing it because she was terrified. This was her final year at the Academy and she had learned about a galaxies-spanning ruthless empire and thrown into the mirror universe, and was still eager to do her duty.

Chapter Ten

Operations Centre

Starbase 535 (Our universe)

Stardate 55403.1 (May 28, 2378)

Captain Lionel Logan looked out over the assembled commanding officers standing by the central table nicknamed The Core. Subcommander Sokal wasn't looking happy but after the reports he'd seen of what happened at Ynelav IV he wasn't surprised. Captain Vikagh had been conquering a number of worlds for the Empire, and Chancellor Martok was currently under pressure by President Satie to expand in other directions from Federation space, which meant that the Klingon captain had very little to do, and was vocal about it. Captains Dhrex and Aurelia were waiting for the other shoe to drop and Commander Madden was looking forward to taking the *Everest* out. Starfleet Command had finally listened to reason and sent him a *Defiant*-class escort vessel and Madden would command it, leaving McNamara as acting first officer.

'All right, everyone, this is the situation. We haven't heard from the *Pytheas* in three days and can't spare anyone to go and look for them, but according to the Eeroth, the ship was forced to leave their territory and left without incident. Let's just hope they make it back before the trouble starts. I have spoken with Starfleet Command, frequently, and unfortunately no more vessels can currently be spared. I am liaising with the local populations to see if they will lend us a few vessels in order to bolster our defences but have yet to receive an answer.'

'How long do we have, Captain?' Aurelia asked.

'I believe we have a week, ten days at most, before the Cha'lav attack,' Logan replied. 'The sensor drones we've dropped across the sector are picking up rifts opening everywhere with a current count of thirty-some vessels, from frigates to heavy cruisers. When the attack happens it will be big and it will be brutal. I have ordered all civilians to be relocated to the colonies and the Kursicans have stepped up production of their own space fleet, for whatever good it will do.'

'We will be victorious,' Vikagh stated. 'We have honour on our side.'

'The Cha'lav won't know what hit them,' Sokal added. 'We defeated the Dominion, and we will defeat the Cha'lav.'

'We've been making some upgrades to our weapons,' Aurelia said. 'It would be nice to test them against those who really deserve it.'

'The more the merrier,' Dhrex agreed.

'I want you all to return to your scheduled patrol routes, and report in any unusual activity. The colonies still need our support,' Logan told them all, including his foreign allies.

'What about the colonies who have renounced Federation citizenship?' Aurelia, her tone voice clearly indicating how ignorant those colonies were.

'They will have to fend for themselves unfortunately. We can't spare any ships to help them and they have made it quite clear that they're not interested in our help.'

'But they'll be the first to send out a distress call asking for it when the Cha'lav or anyone attacks,' Dhrex interjected.

'Then they are foolish,' Vikagh said. 'But they will die honourable deaths, fighting against an invading force.'

'A waste of life,' Sokal spoke quietly. 'If you will excuse me, I have matters to attend to.'

Vikagh followed a moment later, leaving only Starfleet personnel in the Operations centre, an uncomfortable silence surrounding them.

'I don't suppose anyone has heard from the *Lowell* or Commander Murdoch?' Logan asked, breaking the silence.

'They were heading for Ynelav IV but changed course part way there. I haven't found a trace of them,' Madden answered. 'Lieutenant Marshall is currently undergoing investigation for his role in their disappearance.'

'What role?' Logan asked his executive officer.

'Marshall informed Murdoch that Ynelav wouldn't be a safe harbour for Linnis. He's protecting her from something.'

'So where is he taking her?'

'My guess would be the Delta Quadrant,' Dhrex said. 'According to everything we know about the Ocampa, that's where they come from and Murdoch might think that she'd be safe among her own people, especially considering her talents.'

Logan nodded, agreeing with the assessment. 'Let's hope that Murdoch finds his safe harbour before the Cha'lav find him. All right, everyone, dismissed.'

As the captains headed for the turbolift, Madden and McNamara approached Logan. The station commander waved them into his office.

'Sir, I believe Captain Drummond is a security risk with the Cha'lav attack imminent,' McNamara said, looking more confident in his red uniform.

'On what grounds?'

'If the Cha'lav decide to wake him, they will have the abilities of a seasoned Starfleet captain on their side and it could seriously undermine our efforts to defeat them.'

'Where do you suggest I send him? He'll be a bigger security risk on any inhabited planet in the region, and even more so closer to the core worlds.'

The two Operation Cobalt men looked at each other and then at Logan. 'We should pull the plug on his life support.'

Logan looked shocked. 'No! Not while I'm in command. If there is even a remote chance he could defeat this consciousness then we have to let him try.'

'Sir,' Madden pressed, 'you've read the reports. You know that he's not fighting the battle. He has all but given up. The alien consciousness has taken a more complete hold over Drummond.'

Logan ran a hand through his hair. 'Have you considered that the alien consciousness could be a boon to our fight? That it is working against the Cha'lav?'

'We have considered that possibility, sir, but we feel that Drummond represents too great a security risk,' McNamara answered.

'If we have to, we'll go to Admiral Ranar, and I'm sure he'll give us the

authorisation.'

'He probably would, and it might well be the right decision, but I'm vetoing it for now. Maybe when we get closer to the fight and things don't improve we'll revisit this conversation. Until then, the answer is no and I will enter such in my log. If you go to Ranar it will be against my most strenuous objections.'

Madden nodded. 'Aye sir.'

'Dismissed, gentlemen.'

Chapter Eleven

**Starship *Defiant*/Alliance starship
Edge of Alliance space
May 28, 2378 (Stardate 55403.3)**

Cadet Maria Snowcroft stood beside Smiley, Gonzales, Xeris and Aaron on the transporter pads. They had manoeuvred the cloaked vessel within the Cardassian ship's shield envelope and would decloak for six seconds to effect transport when the Cardassian sensors were focussed elsewhere, specifically the diversion that Captain Astar was putting on.

'Are you ready?' Smiley asked them.

Snowcroft raised her phaser. 'Let's do this, sir.'

Gonzales nodded. 'Let's go. Signal the *Pytheas*.'

'Message received,' Anjuna said from the console and stepped onto the pad. 'When you hear a triple chime we'll be transported.'

Almost a minute later, the *Pytheas* released a probe toward the Badlands and the console chimed three times, automatically triggering the dematerialisation sequence. The six men and women materialised on board the Cardassian ship and immediately raised their weapons. There was no one in sight on the lowest deck of the warship and the group made their way as quietly as possible on the bare metal decking toward the Cardassian equivalent of a Jeffries tube.

'We'll split up here,' O'Brien said. 'Xeris, you and I will take Anjuna to engineering to get the cloak. We'll go to deflector control to set a trap or two.'

The Romulan turned to Gonzales. 'Good luck,' he added as he pulled away the panel and climbed inside, followed by Smiley, and then Anjuna taking up the rear.

'Why am I going with you?' Aaron complained to Gonzales.

'Because your wife will probably kill you,' she answered with a sneer. 'Not that I wouldn't do the same, but I want you where I can see you.'

Gonzales climbed in once the others had gone and hauled Aaron in after her.

'If you try anything, I will kill you.'

Snowcroft got in last and pulled the panel back into place. 'We need to go up six decks and crawl half the length of the ship.'

'We'd better get started then,' Gonzales said and began climbing up the ladder.

Aaron followed and Snowcroft watched as she began her own climb. She'd memorised every aspect of the mission. Alpha Team would go to engineering, detach the cloak and activate a coded transponder which would beam all six of them back to the ship, so Beta Team, then, had to make their modifications to the deflector array quickly.

It took less time than expected for them to reach deck fourteen. Of the ship's twenty decks, the lower four levels were almost all given over to cargo and other uses. Gonzales called a halt to proceedings when she heard voices coming from a tube ahead of them. She understood Cardassian, having been stationed in the Federation Embassy on Cardassia Prime once the Demilitarised Zone was established.

'They're engineers,' she whispered. 'There's a problem with the main disruptor cannon.'

'That's why Dukat didn't pick a fight,' Snowcroft suggested. 'We need to get past them somehow.'

'Any suggestions?' Aaron muttered, a little too loudly.

Gonzales cursed as a Cardassian head poked its way out of an alcove ahead of them. She fired before they could raise the alarm but that would happen soon enough. 'Let's go, silence be damned.'

As expected, klaxons sounded across the ship. Snowcroft heard hatches sliding shut. 'We need to get out of here, they're going to flood the tubes with neurazine gas.'

'Where?' Gonzales asked.

'Back this way,' she replied, backtracking ten metres and forcing a panel off the bulkhead.

It led onto a deck filled with Cardassian soldiers, but she had her phaser firing blindly as she rolled out. Once Aaron and Gonzales were out, she put the panel back on and laid down covering fire. The only safe haven was a door at the end of the corridor but there was no cover between them and the door. Gonzales mowed down three Cardassians who tried to catch them in a pincer attack and Snowcroft grabbed Aaron by the collar.

‘Lower your weapons or he dies,’ she yelled in badly accented Cardassian.

‘Why should we care about a Terran?’ one of them asked in heavily accented Standard.

‘Regent Martok would not be pleased to learn that you allowed his favourite prisoner to escape.’

The Cardassian considered it for a moment before another alarm sounded.

‘Warp core breach,’ Aaron said in a whisper, struggling. ‘Good plan.’

‘Come on!’ Gonzales muttered as she entered the room.

Snowcroft dragged Aaron with her, using him as a shield. Gonzales came out of the room to help her and pushed both of them inside before being shot by a Cardassian disruptor. The door slid shut and she tried to reach it again but couldn’t as she was surrounded by armed Cardassians.

‘Pick her up,’ a Glinn shouted and two low-ranked soldiers did as they were asked. ‘Take her for processing.’

Main power suddenly failed and Gonzales broke free, cursing and heading for the room where Snowcroft and Aaron were. The transporter took her before she reached it.

‘Where are they?’ she asked Anjuna as only four people rematerialised on the *Defiant*.

‘They must be in a shielded location,’ the engineer replied.

‘We need to get out of here before they get main power back online,’ Smiley said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Her wellbeing was my responsibility. We have to go back,’ she yelled striding

forward.

'Sheena, we'll get her back,' Xeris said, putting the cloaking device on the deck and taking her in his arms. 'You know the Captain won't rest until we do.'

'She was my responsibility, she's still at the Academy.'

'We'll get her back,' he said soothingly and looked at Smiley.

The general shook his head in the negative, telling Xeris exactly what he expected. The young woman was unlikely to survive, unless Dukat had a plan in mind for her.

'We'll head back to the *Pytheas* and get this installed. Then we can get to Rura Penthe and rescue your man.'

'If Dukat harms even one hair, I'll kill him with my bare hands,' Gonzales promised.

Xeris hefted the cloak in one hand and led Gonzales to the bridge, following Smiley and Anjuna.

'Set a course to rendezvous with the *Pytheas*,' Smiley instructed the young woman at the helm. 'It's time we ended this nonsense.'

Chapter Twelve

USS Pytheas

Edge of Alliance space

May 28, 2378 (Stardate 55403.4)

Captain Astar met the returning away team in the transporter room and stopped in her tracks when she noticed that one was missing. Gonzales had been wounded, and Xeris was putting on an overly stoic mien which spelled trouble.

‘What happened?’ she asked, all business.

‘It was an ambush in a corridor, I pushed them into a room and got myself shot for my trouble. When we beamed away, Wright and Snowcroft didn’t come back. The room must have been shielded.’

‘Did you try to get them back?’

‘Smiley overruled us, said there was no time.’

‘There wasn’t,’ Anjuna Mahtani said. ‘We should install the cloak as quickly as possible and get moving. Dukat will be repairing his ship with haste to get his revenge.’

‘What about my Cadet?’

‘She’s a prisoner and if she’s lucky, dead. If not, then I’m sorry.’

Gonzales slumped to one side and Xeris propped her up as she regained her equilibrium.

‘Sheena?’ Astar asked. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes, Captain,’ Gonzales replied. ‘I’m fine.’

‘Take some time to rest.’

‘I would prefer to be at my post.’

‘As you wish. Xeris, Anjuna, please get that cloak installed. It has cost us enough already.’

'Aye sir,' Xeris replied and nudged Anjuna toward the door.

'Sheena, if you need to talk, let me know.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Astar nodded. 'Come on, let's get back to the bridge.'

Talen stood up from the command chair as Astar and Gonzales emerged from the turbolift. 'Captain, Gul Dukat is hailing us.'

'On screen.'

'Ah, Captain, it is pleasant to see you again. I trust that you are not missing any crewmen at all. I seem to have increased my crew complement somewhat.'

'All my people are accounted for, Gul Dukat,' Astar said without showing any hint of her discomfort.

He sighed. *'Very well. I will take my new crewmen to New Hebitia to have them indoctrinated in the ways of Oralius, good day to you.'*

As the screen blanked and the Cardassian warship went to warp, Astar turned to Gonzales. 'Did he just say...?'

'Yes sir, he did.'

'I think we need to talk to General O'Brien.'

'Aye sir, I'll contact him right away.'

'Don't bother, I'm here,' O'Brien said emerging onto the bridge from the observation lounge. 'I suppose you want an explanation?'

'That would be nice, but I'd like to know how you got aboard first.'

'Our transporters are somewhat more sophisticated than yours. They have to be to prevent your lot coming through all the time.'

'All right, what was Dukat talking about? And why did you lie about him?'

'I didn't lie, Captain. Dukat is the leader of the Cardassian religious movement known as the Oralian Way, who worship Oralius, the deity of ancient Hebitian civilisation. They've grown disillusioned with the Alliance over the years and when the Rebellion took Terok Nor, they attacked the Alliance, leading Legate Damar and Regent Martok to brand them traitors and eradicate them from existence.'

'I take it that didn't happen?'

'The Way had been gathering ships for a while and when the Alliance decided to kill them all, it created a bigger movement which is fast turning into a civil war. Glinn Damar learned that Dukat was a worshipper of Oralius and informed Martok. Dukat escaped before he could be executed and Damar was made a Legate, second only to Regent Martok.'

'How do you know all this?'

'I told them,' another voice said, entering the bridge.

Gonzales stopped an overzealous security officer from pulling his phaser with a shake of her head. 'Natima Lang.'

'You know me?'

'In our universe, yes. You were a...leader of the Cardassian people.'

'As I am of the Oralian Way, or will be once Dukat is taken care of.'

'Gonzales, scan her. Is she emitting the signal we detected earlier?'

In a quick movement, Gonzales grabbed a tricorder and scanned the female Cardassian. 'Yes, she is.'

Astar nodded. 'You carry the essence of a Prophet within you, to fight the Pah Wraiths in the Celestial Temple and expel them.'

'Yes, she will,' O'Brien said. 'With the Bajorans and the New Hebitians on our side, we'll be able to dissolve the Alliance and bring some kind of peace to the Alpha Quadrant.'

'What about the Imperium?'

'You'll help us deal with them,' Lang said. 'After all, you need to if you're to get back to your universe safely.'

Astar walked up to Lang, almost to her face. 'You cannot stop this ship leaving once Commander Wright and Cadet Snowcroft are back in our hands. If you try, I will kill you and your precious rebellion will crumble. Do not test me.'

Lang stepped back. 'You must help us. The Prophets would not have sent you to us if you were not meant to help us.'

'Your Aaron Wright brought us here against our will after committing several criminal acts. I want to get my people back and then go home.'

The doors to the turbolift opened and Xeris stepped out with Anjuna behind him.

She walked over to O'Brien and Lang joined them while Xeris moved to stand with Gonzales. 'Captain Astar, the cloak has been installed. We will maintain silent running until we reach the Rura Penthe system,' Anjuna said.

O'Brien pressed a stud on the wrist-comm he wore and the three of them disappeared.

'Larson, set a course for Rura Penthe, warp six.'

'Aye sir.'

'Xeris, engage the cloak.'

As the *Pytheas* jumped to warp under cover of darkness, Astar wondered what was happening to Maria Snowcroft and whether she would emerge from her ordeal alive, and if she did whether she would be well physically and emotionally.

Chapter Thirteen

Cardassian vessel

En route to New Hebitia

May 29, 2378 (Stardate 55406.7)

Cadet Maria Snowcroft struggled once again to free herself from the restraints and then flopped back against the hard, unyielding surface of the examination table. She looked at Aaron Wright who was still unconscious, and then back at her own body. They were both naked and she thought for a brief moment that one of the Cardassians might take advantage of her in that position but then some other part of her mind took hold. She knew they wouldn't, even though they were more sadistic than the Cardassians from her universe, because Gul Dukat had something else in mind for them. This was their biometric assessment of her, processing her for their records. As she struggled futilely yet again, she noticed the sudden temperature increase. It had been rather cold, at least by Cardassian standards, but the temperature was now rising rapidly, and she was becoming lightheaded. She lay back and willed her body to calm itself.

The doors slid open and Dukat entered with another man, one she didn't recognise.

'Release him, and take him to the brig,' Dukat ordered.

'What are you going to do with him?'

'Why do you care, child?' Dukat asked gently as he caressed her cheek.

'I am responsible for his wellbeing,' Snowcroft replied with an even tone. 'I suggest that you allow us both to go free and return us to my ship.'

'You are in no position to make threats, young lady,' Dukat told her, running his hand down her body. 'You will make an excellent comfort woman for my eldest son, provided you behave yourself.'

'I will be nobody's comfort woman,' Snowcroft replied with steel she didn't know she possessed.

Dukat flashed a smile that made her skin crawl. 'We'll see. I'll be back for you later.'

Snowcroft flexed against the restraints and felt something give, but not enough. She relaxed on the table as Dukat and other man left her in darkness. The temperature was lowered again and she felt her body stiffen with the cold. Snowcroft refused to cry, refused to let them see how helpless she felt. She was a Starfleet officer and she would carry herself with dignity, or as much as she could muster.

It was several hours before Dukat entered the room again with the other man, and she was only vaguely aware of the man untying the restraints and hoisting her over a shoulder. She blacked out and awakened some time later in what could charitably be described as small quarters, and she had been dressed in a tight-fitting wrap of some kind. It was certainly not a cell. As she paced the five steps around each side of the cramped quarters, she made plans for her escape that meant navigating the corridors of the unfamiliar ship, rescuing Aaron and getting away before Dukat knew what was going on. She had an eidetic memory so knowing where to go was easy, knowing where Aaron was being held was another matter entirely.

Snowcroft lay down on the plush pastel couch in the room and had closed her eyes when the door opened, letting light into the darkened room for a few seconds. The door slid closed with a sigh and she found herself alone with a Cardassian soldier of low rank. She narrowed her eyes at the smile on his face and was ready to fight back but he just sat on the couch, trying not to touch her and she stared at him in mute shock.

'We're not all like Dukat. I have no interest in you, but I was ordered to test you for Dukat so I obey. My partner works at Rura Penthe and I don't get out there much so I am hoping that with you and the other Terran aboard, I might finally get to see him.'

'I thought we were going to New Hebitia?'

'We are, but Dukat will take the other Terran back to Rura Penthe, that's where he escaped from.'

Snowcroft nodded. Dukat was planning something, of that she was sure, but at least she now knew something. 'Where is he being held. I heard Dukat order him to be taken to the brig, but I don't know if he was really taken there.'

'He is in the brig, but don't try anything until we get to Rura Penthe, you won't survive. When I leave, take off your clothes and breathe heavily, as if we have

had sex. It will please Dukat when he comes to check on you.'

'I don't want to please him,' she replied petulantly.

'You should, or you'll never leave this ship alive,' the Cardassian informed her.

'Why do you care what happens to me?'

'I can't tell you that, just know that I do and if I can help you get off this ship when we reach Rura Penthe, I will.'

Snowcroft nodded. She knew that the *Pytheas* and the *Defiant* were both headed to Rura Penthe so she would be able to deal with the escape when they reached orbit. 'Can you shut down the brig for me at the right time?'

'I'm a security officer, I'm usually posted at the brig during the main shift, so it depends on when we reach the planet.'

'Thank you.'

'Take off your clothes,' he said as he pulled off part of his uniform. 'I'm going to leave and put this back on. Remember, Dukat will be by a few minutes after I leave. He will expect you to be naked.'

She considered her options. 'What if I was reluctant to submit?'

'Then I will have torn your clothes from you. Have you been difficult?'

'I have.'

'Then it's best if the clothes are torn. It will look more realistic, as will this,' he replied and punched her in the face.

She crumpled as he tore the wrap from her body and left her lying by the couch. 'Should have known he'd do that.'

Dukat entered less than a minute later and saw her condition. 'Perhaps you will be more pliable next time,' he said and walked out chuckling to himself.

Chapter Fourteen

**Vorta Imperial Flagship
Romulan Annexed Territories
May 29, 2378 (Stardate 55406.8)**

Tal'Aura looked at the door of the wardroom as if it would provide answers.

It didn't.

She had been kept out of the loop for days and didn't like it one bit. It was only when she was angry that she was able to force the Pah Wraith to leave her mind, and staying angry meant keeping her worst memories on the surface. The Jem'Hadar ignored her when she was herself, preferring only to bow to the thing inside her. As for Weyoun, he treated both of her the same, with barely concealed distaste.

'Enough of this!' the Pah Wraith said, taking control of her body. 'It is time I took control once and for all.'

'I told you I would fight you.'

'It is too late. Our hand has been forced by the Federation ship.'

'How?'

'That is not for you to question, but I will allow you to learn, this time.'

The Pah Wraith pushed open the door and the Jem'Hadar inside immediately knelt before her. Weyoun looked up from his conference with other Vorta on ships throughout the region.

'What is the meaning of this interruption, Tal'Aura?'

'The Federation ship is at Rura Penthe, in Klingon space. You will intercept them immediately.'

'I will do no such thing,' Weyoun replied with steel. 'We are en route to Qo'noS to force the Klingon-Cardassian Alliance to surrender. Your vendetta will have to wait.'

Her eyes flashed a bright red in fierce anger. **'The Federation ship and the**

Defiant have our greatest enemy on board. You must intercept and destroy them now. Without our help you will never locate all the Founders and make galaxy submit to your whim.'

Weyoun smiled. 'We do not need your help, and we never have done. The Romulans on the other hand, are weak and pitiful creatures. Bend them to your will.'

The Pah Wraith felt Tal'Aura fighting. 'I am not weak!'

'You are dead,' the Pah Wraith replied and crushed the Romulan's consciousness. She turned her gaze outward again, to Weyoun. **'As you can see, I can crush the Romulans. They are merely a means to an end. They were the easiest to control since the Founders made you immune to our control. But you still feel pain and I will make you feel pain each time to disobey me.'**

'The Imperium will find the Founders and stop them. Then, if you ask nicely, we will assist you in stopping your enemy.'

She screamed. **'You do not understand, Vorta! The rebellion are succeeding in their plan to destabilise the Alliance and make them an easier target for you, but they want you gone and they have the means to do it. Their weapons are no match for yours, but they know your weaknesses. I know theirs.'**

'And you will tell us, on our terms.'

The Pah Wraith made a wry smile. **'I have indulged you long enough. There is no more time. First Taran'atar, kill the Vorta and order the others' executions. The Pah Wraiths now control the Imperium.'**

The Jem'Hadar used his blade, his kar'takin, to slice through Weyoun's brain stem. The Vorta was dead before he hit the floor.

'Excellent, set a course for Rura Penthe. We should arrive in time to destroy the combined fleet.'

'At once, Pah Wraith,' Taran'atar replied with a Jem'Hadar salute.

The Jem'Hadar filed out of the wardroom leaving her behind with Weyoun's corpse. She felt no remorse at the loss of either the Romulan host's

consciousness or the Vorta leader. Both were necessary to her goal. The Pah Wraith's hold on the Celestial Temple had been temporary at best. But over the last few centuries, they had managed to eliminate as many Prophets as they could. It was only a matter of time before they were all gone.

The one she was chasing now was the most powerful of those that remained, the one who had chosen this universe's Emissary to lead the Bajoran people to freedom. The Vorta Imperium had stopped that from happening when they razed Bajor after first coming through the Celestial Temple. The Pah Wraiths only allowed them through because it served their purpose—at the time. Now it didn't and no further incursions would be allowed through.

Taran'atar entered the wardroom again. 'Pah Wraith, we will arrive at Rura Penthe in four days.'

'Excellent. Remove this from my sight and clean up the mess.'

'As you command.'

'Did you want to ask a question?'

'I did, my God.'

'Then ask, how else will you learn.'

'What will happen once you have destroyed the fleet at Rura Penthe?'

'Our hold on the Celestial Temple will be complete and none will be able to oust us.'

'How do you know the enemy is going to Rura Penthe?'

'We have an operative,' the Pah Wraith answered with a smile. **'Why do you ask?'**

'I was...curious.'

'The Founders did not breed this into your genes did they?'

'No, my God.'

'You have exceeded your genetic structure. This does not bode well for

our continued use of your people as footsoldiers.'

Taran'atar bristled. 'We will obey your commands. As you say, curiosity leads to knowledge. Knowledge leads to victory, and victory is life!'

The Pah Wraith nodded. **'Back to your station, First. I want you to be ready to drop the fleet out of warp just inside weapons range. I don't want the rebels or the Federation ship to get a chance to fire at us. I know our weapons work well against the Alliance.'**

'Our weapons will cleave the Alliance in two, making them easy to pick off.'

'Back to your station.'

As Taran'atar left, two more Jem'Hadar entered to remove the body and another two to clean up the mess left behind. That was the trouble with corporeal bodies, the detritus they left behind after death. She had seen dead civilisations and the worlds they inhabited which took centuries or millennia to fully recover before the next occupants arrived.

She had a sense of something in the room with her but it faded before she could grasp it.

Chapter Fifteen

Cardassian vessel

En route to Rura Penthe

May 30, 2378 (Stardate 55410.1)

Now dressed in a flimsy gauze of a dress that showed more than it hid, Maria Snowcroft was in a harem awaiting the officers coming off-shift. As she waited for whatever fate befell her, she considered the differences in behaviour between the two universes. Dukat was far crueller in this universe, as expected, but his deviousness had yet to be calculated. He was used to calling the shots and had been in a position of power before Legate Damar had ousted him somehow. She wondered how troublesome the Aaron Wright of this universe was that his incarceration at Rura Penthe would be enough to restore Dukat's powerbase and rid him of Damar.

'Are you really from that other universe?' one of the other Terrans asked her.

'I think she's a spy,' an older Bajoran woman said. 'You know Dukat likes to play his games.'

Snowcroft rubbed her face where the soldier's rough scales had caused more damage than the punch itself and opened and closed her eye a few times to test the depth perception. It was improving. 'I am from the other universe, and if I were a spy, what information do you think Dukat would be after from a collection of comfort women. He probably knows everything that happens on this ship anyway and I know this room is monitored. I'm a Starfleet officer, not a Terran whore.'

The older woman stepped forward to where Snowcroft was sitting. 'I am no whore. Dukat treats me well and my family wants for nothing.'

'What's your name?'

'Why do you care?'

'I've noticed that in some cases, the roles people play in life are remarkably similar in both universes. Indulge my Terran curiosity.'

The woman smiled a little. 'My name is Tora Naprem.'

The thought suddenly coalesced. 'You have a daughter, don't you?'

'I have several, what of it?'

The Cadet looked around the harem and then up at where she thought the listening devices were. She decided to go ahead anyway. 'You have a daughter with Dukat, don't you?'

'I did have, she died,' Tora replied sadly and dipped her head. Then her head snapped up. 'How do you know that?'

'Her name is Ziyal,' Snowcroft continued. 'She's not dead. Dukat probably hid her away, or sold her so the Order didn't find out. But Damar found out and he found Ziyal, using her to remove Dukat from power. That's why he's back on a ship.'

'You lie!' Tora snarled, reaching for Snowcroft's throat.

The other girls hauled her back.

'I assume that Dukat was in a position of great power, so what could be enough to make him fall so far?'

Tora dropped to a couch. 'An illegitimate child, a half-breed,' she almost whispered. 'Have you seen her?'

'In my universe, Damar killed her for treason. She was a beautiful woman.'

Snowcroft was thankful that she'd had the opportunity to live on *Deep Space Nine* otherwise she'd never have been able to use this.

'He'll not kill her again,' Tora swore.

'Damar doesn't need her anymore,' the cadet replied. 'If you help me get out of here, I can help you find her.'

'How?'

'Dukat knows where she is, I heard him telling someone when I was brought on board. I think he's a doctor of some kind.'

'A butcher,' Tora said. 'He's the only one Dukat confides in, so he probably knows where Ziyal is as well. He'll be easier to reach than Dukat.'

'That's as it may be,' the devil said as he entered the room and looked at Snowcroft. 'I see you need another lesson.'

'I would advise against that,' Tora said and the other girls surrounded the cadet.

Dukat touched a button on his wrist-comm and the doors opened, flooding the room with guards. 'Move aside or I will have no choice but to shoot you all.'

'Even me?' Tora asked.

'You no longer entice me, my dear.'

'Then I will take my daughter and leave.'

'I don't think so. Ziyal is a daughter of Hebitia and will join me.'

'No, she won't,' Tora lunged at Dukat and was cut down before she made it a metre.

This galvanised the others into close-quarters action, tackling the guards before they could fire. Dukat backed out of the room as Snowcroft moved after him. She was so intent on him that she didn't see the three guards until they pinned her down. She managed to get one of them off her with a back kick but another joined the fray. The girls were barely holding their own against the guards and Snowcroft began to fight with whatever limb was free. Her arms were held down and her legs trapped as one of the guards decided to take advantage of her. When his hand touched the bare flesh between her legs, something inside her snapped.

With a movement faster than the eye could see, Snowcroft scissored her legs and snapped the guard's spine, then flipped herself over and dislodged her arms from the other Cardassians. In less than a second, she'd twisted their necks and slid about the room as silently as a ghost. About a minute after the melee started, the guards lay dead on the deck and the girls were cradling Tora's body. Snowcroft just crouched nearby breathing slowly as blood dripped from her hands, most of it hers from attacking the micro-scales that passed for Cardassian skin.

'What happened to you?' a young Terran asked fearfully.

'My mother says my people call it blood rage.'

'You're not Terran are you?'

'Half-human,' she answered with a sigh.

'What of the other half?'

'I don't know. I only ever knew my mother. My father left before I was born and my mother never spoke of him.'

'We should leave you in a room with Dukat,' the Terran said, feeling safer. 'We'll help you, but we should leave this room before he checks the security feeds.'

'Take the weapons. We'll need them,' Snowcroft said as she picked up a phaser rifle. 'It's time that the Alliance learned that we won't die on our knees.'

Chapter Sixteen

USS *Pytheas*

En route to Rura Penthe

May 31, 2378 (Stardate 55412.3)

At tactical, Lieutenant Commander Gonzales was running simulations for every possible escape scenario from the Klingon prison, with variables constantly being uploaded to and downloaded from Lieutenant Parker's combat training simulations on the holodeck. She was taking the security forces through a brutal training system of hand to hand combat with Klingons and a variety of aliens that they might need to fight through to get to Wright—and Snowcroft, if she was there. The captain had suggested a stealthy approach considering the number of vessels which were likely to be there, but the cloak would need to be dropped to transport the security teams down to the surface outside the scattering field and shuttles were out of the question. It was going to be difficult with three security teams of ten being down on the surface, each trying to complete their objectives while the *Pytheas* would be trying to hide or fight, with or without the *Defiant's* help.

'Parker to Gonzales,' the security chief called.

'Go ahead, Lieutenant.'

'I think we may have a problem. I've been looking over the plans of Rura Penthe that we have in our library, and there is a problem with the shield generator.'

'What kind of problem?' Gonzales asked, bringing up the plans on one of her own monitors.

'Getting through the scattering field won't be a problem, but once we're on the surface, the teams will have less than thirty minutes before exposure kicks in and we need to pull them out. The shield generator itself is buried under metres of snow and ice. As soon they start firing, the place will light up. I think we should transport them down and take out the shield generator ourselves.'

'That's a decision the Captain has to make, Lieutenant. Give me a plan in an hour and I'll take it to her for approval. Keep working on escape scenarios. Remember that getting Wright back, both of them, and Snowcroft, is only part of the mission. We still have to assist the rebellion and the Alliance in ridding the Alpha Quadrant of the Imperium.'

'I'm aware of that, sir.'

'Good, Gonzales out.'

She looked at the plans herself and agreed with the security chief's recommendation. The scattering field prevented people beaming in and out but it only extended to just over two kilometres from the entrance to the prison itself in every surface direction, including into the lower atmosphere. The best way of getting in was to beam down the security teams outside the scattering field and give them time to reach the prison. Then rescue their people, destroy the shield generator from the ship, beam everyone up and get out of there.

True to form, Parker personally delivered her proposal to Gonzales in fifty-seven minutes and they went over it, with Gonzales adding her recommendations. Parker agreed, since she would be leading the alpha team. Then Parker held the tactical station as Gonzales went to deliver the proposal to the captain, who'd been ensconced in her ready room for hours, long before alpha shift had begun.

'Come,' the voice answered from inside and Gonzales entered.

The lights were turned down low and Gonzales could barely see the captain lying on the couch by the window. Astar stood up, swayed on her feet for a second and then made her way to the desk. The ankle bracelet blinked brightly in the semi-darkness.

'Captain, I have a proposal for you for the most tactically sound way to retrieve our people.'

'Computer, lights up full. Let me see it.'

Gonzales held out the padd as the lights came back on at full intensity.

Astar looked over the method of infiltration and extraction and then glanced up at her. 'You want us to fire on the surface?'

'It's the only way we'll get our people out. It's so cold down there, that even getting inside the prison complex might be too much. Even our best people aren't trained against sub-zero search and rescue operations.'

'Who on board, regardless of discipline, is best suited to an arctic

environment?’

Gonzales considered the question. ‘I would say Ensign Gerema, she’s from Polaris XVII, one of the outer planets in the binary system. I believe her species are descended from native polar bears. Do you want me to pull her off science duty to train with security?’

‘Yes, she’ll lead gamma team.’

‘Sir, she is fresh out of the Academy.’

‘No she isn’t, Commander. I like to know everything I can about the people under my command. She graduated six years ago and has been on her homeworld undergoing a coming of age ritual. This is her first assignment, however, but I still want her leading gamma team.’

‘Aye sir,’ Gonzales replied. ‘I’ll speak to her now. Captain, if you don’t mind saying so, you’ve spent a lot of time in here the last day or so.’

‘Is that all, Commander?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘Dismissed.’

Gonzales left the ready room, leaving the captain to her thoughts.

‘Lieutenant, join me please.’

As they entered the turbolift, a junior officer took her place at tactical.

‘Is there a problem?’ Parker asked.

‘Nope, the Captain signed off on the plan. But she wants Ensign Gerema to lead strike team gamma.’

‘Ensign Gerema, isn’t she from the science division?’

‘She’s got experience in arctic conditions and will be an asset to the team. We’ll have her switched to security for the duration of the mission and train her with your security people. We’ve only got another two days before we reach the prison and I want this to go off without a hitch.’

‘Aye sir, I’ll begin another round of simulations.’

‘All right then. Do you want to have a drink after shift?’

‘You can’t,’ Parker replied with a smirk.

‘Why not?’ Gonzales asked, frowning.

‘It’s your three month anniversary with our favourite Romulan engineer.’

Gonzales slapped her forehead. ‘Oh hell, I forgot all about it. I’ll speak to Gerema and then go find something to replicate.’

Parker laughed to herself as Gonzales trotted off down the corridor as soon as the turbolift doors opened.

Chapter Seventeen

Cardassian vessel

En route to Rura Penthe

June 1, 2378 (Stardate 55414.9)

The women of the former harem had held the Cardassian vessel for the last two days. Many of the Cardassians had agreed to join them in liberating the Klingon prison as several of their people were held there for nothing more than disagreeing with the former Regent. Gul Dukat and his mysterious medical confidante had thus far escaped all patrols made by the women and the other Cardassian soldiers. Seated in the command chair, Cadet Snowcroft smiled to herself as the vessel got closer and closer to the prison with each passing moment.

'I don't suppose anyone else wants to take command for a while?' she asked, idly tossing a blade in the air.

'I wouldn't mind having my ship back,' a voice replied and she caught the blade as it fell.

'Dukat!' she hissed as she saw him holding the young Terran woman who was a gifted engineer.

'Give me control and I will release her.'

'She's as good as dead anyway and we all know it,' Snowcroft replied, giving the girl a look. 'Where's your doctor friend? Trying to flood the ship with gas so you can retake it? He might find that a little difficult.'

Dukat's eyes widened slightly. 'How do you I don't have a number of plans?'

'Because if you did, I would be dead. Your doctor is probably dead already or being held for interrogation by some very angry women.'

The Terran girl suddenly stamped down hard on Dukat's foot and he cursed as she spun away. He tried to move out of Snowcroft's line of sight but was unable to do so fast enough and found her blade buried in his chest.

'Is he dead?' the Terran girl asked.

'No, why don't you get the good doctor to patch him, and assist if you like.'

Those kind of wounds can be painful.'

She nodded and another woman helped her remove the Cardassian's prone form. Snowcroft turned to the viewscreen and watched the stars. The ship would reach the prison only hours before the *Pytheas* and she planned to be ready. Because of the cloaking device installed in her ship, she had no idea where they were and didn't want to contact them in case the Alliance or the Imperium were listening in. She needed assistance and suddenly realised where she could get it.

'I need to contact the New Hebitia leadership.'

'They will want to know where Dukat is and why we're not on our way,' a Cardassian replied. 'That's why you ordered us to radio silence.'

Snowcroft sighed. 'Plans have changed. We'll need assistance at Rura Penthe, unless you want the Klingons to win?'

The Cardassian sneered at her. 'Legate Macet will no doubt have some choice words for you.'

'If the rivalry between cousins is as contested in this universe as it was in ours, I have no fears. Now contact him. If we can get even one more ship then you might be able to keep the prison for yourselves.'

The Cardassian nodded and turned to the communications console. 'Stand by.'

There was a burst of static for a moment which then cleared and the sour visage of Legate Macet, Dukat's almost identical cousin, appeared on the viewscreen. '*Who the hell are you?*'

'I am Maria Snowcroft of the Federation starship *Pytheas*. Your cousin and his doctor are being interrogated by his former harem and I am in command.'

Macet laughed long and hard. '*A mere slip of a girl took my cousin's ship? I like that. What do you plan to do when you get here?*'

Snowcroft swallowed. 'I am going to Rura Penthe to release your people and hand it over to the Cardassians. I may need a little assistance.'

'*Your starship is en route there anyway, and I do not wish to antagonise Regent Martok too much.*'

'What of the Imperium?'

Macet's eyes narrowed. '*What of them?*'

'My captain has a plan, but for it to work, she needs the cooperation of the Alliance. With the Cardassians in control of Rura Penthe, the Klingons will doubtless launch an attack and once you are all together, you can talk.'

'*The Followers of Oralius are peaceful.*'

'Then you will be dead, Snowcroft out.'

'He doesn't like being cut off like that.'

'I thought as much. But I have informed him of the situation. Either he assists or he does not. I don't need him to prattle on the way your people have a habit of doing.'

The Cardassian smiled. 'We will reach the prison in less than a day, but we'll encounter Klingon vessels and Rura Penthe will hail us asking why we're arriving unannounced.'

'You can say that Dukat has been incapacitated and you have taken command. You can also add that you have Aaron Wright in custody and are returning him to the prison. They'll find out they already have Wright in custody and it will confuse them long enough for the *Pytheas* to make their move.'

'You have a lot of faith in your captain.'

'We don't belong in this universe and she will not leave without our universe's Aaron Wright. If you assist us, we'll help you in fighting off the Imperium.'

'What about the Rebellion?'

'That is none of our concern.'

'They're helping you, aren't they? You already made this offer to them.'

'Go and get Wright up here. He knows this universe and I think he'll want to help in our little endeavour.'

'I'll go and get him, shall I let him see Dukat first?'

'No, I want Dukat alive. He's a good bargaining chip for Legate Damar and Regent Martok.'

'As you wish, Captain.'

Snowcroft sighed as the Cardassian left the bridge. She didn't want this, was too young to command a starship of brigands and rogues, or loyal soldiers, and when she gave her report of her incarceration to Captain Astar, she was sure that there would probably be a reprisal for her unorthodox actions, and her withholding of her unknown ancestry.

Chapter Eighteen

USS *Pytheas*

En route to Rura Penthe

June 2, 2378 (Stardate 55417.3)

Captain Astar glanced down at the ankle bracelet which monitored her lifesigns and that of the symbiont and sighed. She knew that the *Zhian'tara* ritual was long overdue but until now had not believed it to be overly useful. Her symbiont was suffering, that she knew, and she further hoped that the ship would be able to return to their universe before her situation became too dangerous. In the meantime, she had a job to do. The three security teams were on permanent standby and the ship was less than two hours away from Rura Penthe and the radio silence was about to be broken. It was unlikely that the Alliance would be able to break their secure communications but they had been erring on the side of caution nonetheless. Astar glanced at the stars streaming by on the viewscreen and had a sudden pang of guilt for her lost cadet, wondering whether the young girl was still alive and if so, how much alive and damaged she might be.

'Captain, it's time,' Gonzales said from her side.

Astar squared her shoulders. 'Open a channel to the *Defiant*.'

General Smiley appeared on the viewscreen, with Engineer Mahtani by his side. 'Captain, I trust you're ready to retrieve your man?'

'I am, will you assist?'

'Regrettably not. I will however provide backup if you are fired upon, so long as my own mission here is not compromised.'

Astar nodded. 'I expected as much, General. Thank you for all your help. We'll be doing a flyby of the planet to deposit the security teams and retreat to the edge of the system.'

'Will you have time to retrieve them considering the time they will be exposed?'

'I have a plan for that eventuality.'

Smiley smiled. 'I'm sure you do, Captain. For now, I bid you adieu.'

'Looks like we're on our own,' Gonzales replied.

'As we expected we would be,' Astar countered. 'Go to yellow alert and have the security teams prepare for insertion.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales said and returned to the tactical console. 'Gonzales to Security Teams Alpha through Gamma, prepare for insertion, T minus ninety minutes.'

'Commander, how is plan B proceeding?'

'We've made the preparations but the computer simulations are borderline, they work with the modifications about fifty percent of the time.'

'That will have to do, are the transporters coordinated?'

'Yes sir, the computer will be doing all the work. We'll decloak for five point two seconds.'

'We'll be seen,' Astar stated.

'By everything in the area, which is why as soon the cloak is back up we'll be moving and hopefully they won't be able to track us.'

'If they do?'

'Then we blow them out of orbit.'

Astar inwardly sighed, she was getting far too involved in this universe for her liking, but at this point there was no going back. She had made her decision to rescue a Starfleet officer and provide information, at the very least, to rid this galaxy of the Vorta Imperium but it weighed heavily on her mind. She knew that her logs would be scrutinised and she would likely face a court-martial for her actions, but she didn't care. The Dominion, in any form, were a menace and if there was a protracted war in this universe, it would be far worse than in her own because there were no allies for anyone to call upon.

'Captain, I'm picking up another ship decloaking dead ahead,' Gonzales said. 'It's Dukat.'

'Clearly not going to New Hebitia then,' Astar replied with a smile. 'Hopefully

Snowcroft and Wright are still aboard. Have Security Team Delta prep for insertion.'

'Yes ma'am, I will lead them myself.'

'I want you here, Commander. I need a good tactician since we'll be facing a phalanx of birds of prey and warships.'

'Aye sir, all security teams report ready for insertion. They're standing by in all transporter rooms.'

'Excellent, time until we reach Rura Penthe?'

'One hour.'

'How close is Dukat's ship?'

'Less than ten million kilometres away.'

'Contact him.'

'Sir?'

'You heard me, Commander. Open a channel to Dukat's ship.'

Astar and Gonzales stared in utter surprise when the image on the viewscreen changed. Instead of Gul Dukat sitting in the command chair, Cadet Snowcroft was in it, wearing full Cardassian body armour, and Wright stood by her side.

'Captain Astar, as you can see I am perfectly safe.'

'I expect your report will provide a full explanation?'

'Yes ma'am, in the meantime, I have a proposal for you.'

'I'm listening.'

'Gul Dukat will be able to get me into the prison as his prisoner, and with Wright as his special guest. The transport shield will be lowered at that time and your security teams will be able to retrieve Commander Wright.'

'And take out the main shield generator,' Gonzales added.

'I have promised the Cardassians the prison, Captain, in return for their assistance. Gul Dukat was initially reticent until he received a little prompting from his first officer.'

Astar raised an eyebrow but said nothing for now. They needed all the help they could get. 'Cadet, I won't ask how you managed your coup but thank you for getting the Cardassians to help.'

'They're unlikely to assist us, ma'am. Legate Damar has orders to shoot the New Hebitians on sight. The Klingons will interrogate any survivors with the mind sifter. However, we might be able to secure the help of the able-bodied prisoners. Many of them are political prisoners and would do anything to get back at the Klingons. As long as we can get everyone here, we can make them talk.'

'I see,' Astar replied. 'Let's just see how it turns out, shall we?'

'Yes ma'am,' Snowcroft returned and then looked off screen. *'If you'll excuse me, Captain, we're being hailed by Rura Penthe.'*

'We'll await your arrival, Cadet; Astar out.'

'That is fortuitous,' Gonzales added to Astar's thoughts.

'With Dukat involved, there is always the possibility, make that probability, of treachery. Be ready for plan B.'

Chapter Nineteen

Ynelav Cooperative Headquarters

Ynelav V (Our universe)

Stardate 55417.4 (June 2, 2378)

Regent Dolan entered the main conference room of the seventeen storey edifice which served as the headquarters of the region's interstellar alliance. There were twelve seats around the circular table, three of which were still empty and would be for some time. One was unlikely to be filled since High Lord Yannik was dead and what remained of the Resoto Hegemony refused to become part of the Cooperative. Other than himself, the leaders of eight other worlds were present, and only one was a Federation colony.

'Please, be seated. Do not rise on my account. We're all equals here,' he said as he took his chair.

The Akishi Ascendency leader stood and placed his hands on the table, palms flat. 'Perhaps, but we do not have a God at our beck and call.'

The others nodded assent and Dolan realised that this meeting was not going to go well. 'Seer Jonek is not a God, merely a Prophet. And I did not come here to discuss the problems of my world, but of all our worlds. I have received a communique from Captain Logan on *Starbase 535*, the local Federation outpost, asking for our help. He believes the Cha'lav will attack within the next week or so and asked whether we would lend aid to assist his people.'

The Coorlon Queen leaned back in her chair, making it squeak slightly. 'What has the Federation ever done for us. They weren't even aware of our existence until recently.'

The Heklian Supreme Healer turned to face Her Highness. 'Your Majesty, I do not know if you are fully aware of the events surrounding the first Cha'lav invasion of our space and the attempted genocide of all our peoples. The Federation were able to cure everyone infected before they returned home.'

'High Lord Yannik was not cured,' she replied with a smirk.

'Because he was too proud to believe a non-Resoto could help him,' Dolan stated. 'We have a chair open for any Resoto who claims leadership and wishes to join us, just as we maintain seats for any races who wish to join us.'

'Personally, I would prefer not to get involved in any way,' interjected Nexx, the leader of the New Bolarus colony. 'We have renounced Federation membership because we find their entire way of life all-encompassing and wish a simpler one. However, one cannot just say no since the Federation are one of the strongest forces in the region, outside ourselves. If they are defeated, we will be next, and a simple existence is preferable to no existence.'

'I agree,' the Deronian Skire stated. 'We should help them if for no other reason than that. With our help they are more likely to succeed. I say we vote yes.'

Nexx nodded. 'I second the motion and the vote.'

Dolan smiled inside but made no outward sign of jubilation as he raised his hand. 'Raise your hands if you vote yes.'

All but the Akishi leader raised their hands and after a moment, he did as well. 'It would not do to leave the strongest ships at home.'

'Thank you all for your assistance and agreement in this matter. I will speak with Captain Logan and inform him that the Ynelavii Cooperative will join the fight against the Cha'lav. If you'll excuse me, I have matters of state to attend to.'

'Jonek is powerful enough to end this fight before it begins.'

'Perhaps, but we will see what the state of Ynelav IV is before then. My people still need guidance.'

'As do we all.'

Dolan left the others to bicker amongst themselves as to who had the strongest vessels and how they would deploy them. He had a far harder task ahead of him. To convince the Seer that he could well help against the Cha'lav, that he was in fact the most powerful weapon in the Cooperative's arsenal, but he had to do it in such a way that the man didn't feel like he was being pressured into it.

After all, Jonek had the power of life and death in his hands. As soon as Dolan reached the ship, he sought out the Seer. He was seated in the centre of his modest quarters and had his eyes closed.

'I cannot help you.'

'We need your strength,' Dolan sat beside him.

'It is not that I do not want to, it is that I cannot. My strength comes from this world. Since the sun nurtures the world I have power over that as well, but were I to leave, I would be as normal as anyone else. I have come for Ynelav's darkest hour, not anyone else's.'

'That is unfortunate, since the battle will be fought in the Kursican system,' Dolan replied.

'There is another who can help, I was supposed to teach her, but plans have changed. I do not believe you will be able to find her before the battle is joined. However, you may find another like her nearby.'

'Where did she go?'

'Where she went is not important, it is where she has been.'

'Let me guess, *Starbase 535*?'

'Your powers of deduction are improving, my friend.'

Dolan sighed, stood, and reached for the communit in the room. 'Helm, set a course for home and then to *Starbase 535*. I need to speak with Captain Logan in person.'

'Right away, Regent.'

'Do not fear, Dolan, we will emerge victorious, but many will lose their lives to give us our freedom.'

'I wish you would stop talking in riddles with mysticism thrown in. You sound like an Adept.'

'Our people need religious guidance. They have strayed far from the path I set for them the last time I walked on mortal ground.'

Dolan turned. 'Are you inhabiting Jonek's body, or are you a Prophet made mortal?'

Jonek smiled. 'I am both and neither, all and nothing.'

'Right now, I'm getting a headache. Since you will know when we arrive home, I hope you won't mind making your own way down to the surface. I wish to speak with the Federation captain as quickly as possible. It is the only way I'll know what you're talking about.'

Chapter Twenty

Dilithium Mines

Rura Penthe

June 2, 2378 (Stardate 55417.4)

It had taken a long time for Rura Penthe to agree to let Dukat beam down. It was only because Regent Martok agreed to make a detour that they allowed the former Cardassian leader to beam down with his prisoners, but that was when the trouble started. A riot began just before beam in, so when they entered the complex, the sound of fighting and disruptor fire drowned out any conversation. The high-pitched whine of the *Pytheas'* phasers drilled through the ice and instantly destroyed the shield and scattering field generators, leaving the mines completely unprotected.

Dukat hurried his charges along the main corridor of the officers' area, which for now was clear of the fighting, and toward the commander's office. Snowcroft halted in mid-stride as she realised that neither Dukat nor Wright were walking with her. Both men had fallen to stab wounds by an enraged Klingon without her being aware of it. She ducked just in time to avoid being skewered and her hidden DNA came to the fore to give her just enough of an edge. The Klingon tried to use his mek'leth to take off her arm, but she caught the blade and broke the Klingon's arm before using his own blade to kill him.

Erring on the side of caution, she continued toward the commander's office and ducked inside as a disruptor blast tore a chunk of rock from the wall. The office was empty and she guessed the old Klingon in command had gone to find an honourable death. She was now trapped inside the office with no weapons and there was nothing in sight she could use. There was a space on the wall for a bat'leth but that was empty and she finally thought that she had reached the end of the line.

A sound behind her made her turn just as a blade buried itself in the rock behind her. A Klingon smiled, showing yellowed teeth, and approached her cautiously as she grinned right back at him. She dodged his first thrust and brought her arm down on his shoulder. He grunted but didn't waver in his next attack. There was a whine and the Klingon collapsed mid-strike. Snowcroft looked up to find her room mate standing in the doorway with a phaser.

'Thanks.'

'No problem,' Ensign Gerema replied. 'I saw Dukat and Wright in the corridor. Are you all right?'

'I'm fine, let's find our Wright,' Snowcroft countered.

'Sir,' D'rass called, *'I'm picking up eleven people with our universe's quantum signature. They're being held deeper underground, in a separate area.'*

'Lieutenant Parker, do you copy,' Gerema called, only to be answered by static.

'D'rass, find them and bring them to the surface. The Klingons are coming out of the woodwork now. I'll hold them off.'

'Aye sir, D'rass out.'

She passed Snowcroft a spare phaser from her backpack and together, they fired at every Klingon they saw. The prisoners' riot was providing them with extra assistance, which was unfortunately needed. As her security team moved deeper, Humans, Andorians, Tellarites, and other races caused a melee which Gerema and Snowcroft used to enter the deepest level of the underground complex. This level housed what appeared to be a laboratory of some kind, though it was currently empty. The doctor's office was the real prize but whoever was supposed to be here was long gone and likely wouldn't be back.

All of a sudden Gerema found herself pinned to the desk by a Klingon bearing a bat'leth. His mek'leth was buried in her back and her suit's stealth had been compromised.

'What are you, little animal? The Klingon asked, his breath soured by warnog, as he pulled off her helmet.

'Your worst nightmare,' she replied as she reached behind him and extended her claws, skewering his arm and wrenching it away from her.

He let go and she pulled the mek'leth from her back, throwing it into his neck as he attempted to rise.

'Gamma team, status report?' she asked, none the worse for wear.

'We have them, sir,' D'rass reported. 'All eleven, but apparently there were

more.'

'Ensign Gerema, status?' Parker called in.

'We have Wright and ten other people with our quantum signature, Lieutenant. What of the beaming shield?'

'The shield is down. As soon as your people near the surface, you'll be beamed home. The Cardassians are already on their way down to secure the complex. There are Klingon replacements on approach to the system.'

'I have Snowcroft with me, sir,' Gerema replied. 'I found Gul Dukat dead in the corridor, along with Aaron Wright from this universe.'

'I'll inform the Captain, get yourself back up here, Ensign and resume your post.'

'Aye sir, we on our way back.'

Less than a minute later, she met up with the rest of her team, along with some very bewildered Starfleet officers who had been trapped in this universe for some time, subject to the very worst aspects of the mirror universe. Snowcroft helped Commander Wright keep up with the others. He appeared to have been tortured, and whatever had been done to him in the laboratory had clearly affected him. His eyes were almost vacant, with just a glimmer of a man in them. Snowcroft knew that look very well, having seen it on her mother since she was old enough to understand what it was.

She never knew her father, whoever—or whatever—he was and her mother had died thinking and believing that she had been abandoned by her daughter as well. Snowcroft regretted not speaking to her mother after the argument about joining Starfleet, but she couldn't make her mother understand that joining Starfleet was best way to find out who she really was and maybe even who her father was.

They reached the main corridor and Snowcroft felt the familiar tug of the transporter beam. She was still holding onto Wright as the man couldn't even stand up without her assistance. Just as the beam took them, she whispered into his ear.

'It's all right, Aaron, you're safe now.'

Chapter Twenty-One

USS Pytheas

In orbit of Rura Penthe

June 2, 2378 (Stardate 55417.5)

Captain Astar read the cadet's report twice before looking up at the young woman standing before her. Though she had allowed Snowcroft to get cleaned up and retrieve a new uniform from her quarters, she wanted to get the report as soon as possible, and it left a sour taste in her mouth. Snowcroft stood at attention, as she had been since entering the ready room, and hadn't said a word or glanced at the captain.

'At ease, Cadet,' Astar finally said, though Snowcroft relaxed to parade rest. 'I am troubled by several aspects of your report, most noticeably your commandeering of the Cardassian vessel and your negotiating tactics in getting the Cardassians to Rura Penthe. But what gives me the most difficulty is what to do with your revelation that you lied on your application to Starfleet Academy.'

'Permission to speak freely, sir?' Snowcroft asked, ready to fight her corner.

'Granted,' Astar replied, more than a little amused.

'I didn't lie on my application, sir, except by omission. I am half human but I don't know what my other half is. My mother didn't know my father very well and he left when she was pregnant with me, so she never had an opportunity to find out. She was disappointed in me for joining Starfleet and she died angry with me. The only way I will ever find out who he was, who I am, is in Starfleet.'

'Most people join because their families have been in Starfleet for decades or centuries, or because they aspire to be better than they are, they want to help people. Do none of these reasons matter to you?'

The cadet bristled. 'I joined Starfleet because I believed I could make a difference. Starfleet has the greatest library of species available and it may be the only way I know how to find out who I am.'

'I will have to report this to Starfleet, Cadet, and until I do you will be confined to quarters. I have no other choice.'

'What of my other actions?'

'You are still a cadet so a disciplinary hearing will be held when we return to our universe. I am sorry I can do no more for you.'

'It's no more than I expected, Captain. I was aware of my actions when I took them, but I felt it was the best way to get the New Hebitians to the table. They must also fight with the Alliance and the rebels if the Vorta are to be forced back to the Gamma Quadrant.'

Astar was about to reply when Gonzales interrupted. *'Captain, there's a massive disruption in subspace approaching. Sensors register at least twelve Klingon vessels, including the Alliance flagship.'*

'I'm on my way. Have security escort Miss Snowcroft to her quarters and seal her in.'

'Aye sir,' Gonzales replied.

Astar emerged onto the bridge a moment later, just as the Klingon vessels dropped out of warp, almost on top of them. 'On screen.'

The Klingons immediately opened fire on the New Hebitian vessels and Dukat's ship was destroyed in the first volley. Legate Macet, aboard the flagship *Trager*, began fighting back, picking off the smaller vessels and leaving Regent Martok's ship undefended.

'Federation starship, I suggest you leave the area immediately,' Martok warned them. *'This is an internal Alliance matter.'*

'Regent, I apologise for the subterfuge in bringing you here, but there is an urgent matter I wish to discuss with you.'

'I assume this has to do with those Vorta petaQ?'

'It does. They are being commanded to take control of your territory by a race of beings called the Pah Wraith, evil creatures from the Bajoran wormhole.'

'I knew we should have killed those weak ridge-nosed creatures.'

Astar tried not to wince at the loss of such a vibrant people. 'These Pah Wraith will kill you all.'

'They will try, but they will not succeed.'

'Captain, more incoming vessels. Cardassians.'

'Open a channel, split screen. Let's speak with everyone.'

Martok was relegated to half the screen, with Legates Damar and Macet occupying the remaining quarters. Each glared at the other for several moments until Macet broke the silence.

'For Oralius' sake, cease fire. You will need all our ships when the Vorta fleet arrives.'

'It is coming here?' Astar asked.

'I intercepted a message to the Vorta flagship from my own vessel several days ago. One of my crew was being controlled by a Pah Wraith. I vaporised it. We have less than an hour.'

Astar turned to Gonzales and nodded imperceptibly, signalling the tactical officer to mute the channel. 'Commander, signal the *Defiant* to make all haste to the Bajoran system. This may be the only chance they have to stay ahead of the Vorta.'

'Aye sir.'

'All right, let's talk to them again.'

'I will erase you from history!' Damar said angrily. 'Your heresy will no longer be tolerated.'

'We are the true Cardassians. Your state has been corrupted by greed and avarice,' Macet countered. 'You have sullied our world and our name by allying yourself with the Klingons.'

Damar laughed cruelly. *'The Klingons have made us stronger, rulers of the Alpha Quadrant, where we rightly belong.'*

'Then why are you second in all endeavours?' the New Hebitian leader asked.

'Enough,' Astar said. 'The Imperium will be here shortly. We must be ready

for them.'

'You have your man back, why help us?'

'They are a scourge on the galaxy in any universe.'

'Our weapons are no match for theirs,' Damar replied. 'Our ships are nothing more than cannon fodder.'

'I can help you defend yourself, provide you with weapons and defences,' Astar replied.

'Captain, that's in clear violation of General Order 283,' Gonzales said.

'Then Starfleet can court-martial me when we get home. If it were just the Vorta then we would leave them to their fates, but the Pah Wraith are involved and that changes everything.'

Gonzales shook her head. 'I object to this course of action, sir.'

'And it shall be so noted.'

'Well?' Martok quipped. 'Should I kill you all or not?'

Chapter Twenty-Two

USS Pytheas

In orbit of Rura Penthe

June 2, 2378 (Stardate 55417.6)

'I was going to ask you all to join forces with each other in a temporary truce to bolster your forces and destroy the Imperium fleet,' Captain Astar said once all parties were present in the observation lounge. 'But it would seem that is no longer necessary.'

'We are all here and we will fight,' Martok replied. 'What of the rebels?'

Astar had thought of the answer to this question many times and none sounded right to her ears but this was an honest gathering. 'The rebel leadership has been all but annihilated after the attack on *Empok Nor*. General Smiley O'Brien has a Prophet with him, another alien from the wormhole who will assist in ridding the galaxy of the Pah Wraith. I decided to send his ship to the wormhole while we hold off the fleet.'

'They are cowards!' Martok spat. 'I will do nothing to protect them.'

'Oralius guides us toward the light,' Macet added. 'The Celestial Temple will protect us from all evil, once it is cleansed.'

Astar stepped in before Damar could make a comment. 'The Prophets will allow safe passage through the wormhole and they will help us defeat the Pah Wraith, but O'Brien's guest must be protected. She must be allowed to reach the Bajoran system.'

'What is left of it,' Damar smirked.

'You agreed to give us weapons and defences,' Martok said, ignoring the Cardassians entirely.

'Commander Gonzales, please provide them with the modifications for their shields and weapons.'

'Aye sir,' the tactical officer replied, passing out padds to each person in the room. 'These modifications will allow you to withstand several hits from the Imperium's polaron beams and even get through their defences. It will not be an easy fight, and you will lose ships, but we need to hold them off as long as

possible.'

'As it should be!' Martok said and left the room followed by his bodyguard and two Starfleet security officers.

Damar quickly followed on the Klingons heels, escorted by Gonzales, leaving Macet to stare after them as if they were singularly responsible for this entire situation.

'Legate, are you all right?'

'I understand one of your people was with my cousin when he died?'

'That's right, one of my security officers had been a prisoner on his ship.'

'Snowcroft?' the Cardassian asked.

'Yes,' Astar answered. 'How did you know?'

'She convinced me to come here. I am glad she did. The Cardassians now have a foothold in Klingon territory from which to launch our own attack against them. We have been second-class members in this alliance for far too long. The humans have an interesting outlook on life, they always have had, even when they controlled the destinies of billions.'

'The same is true of humans in our universe as well. I have learned never to underestimate them, and never to count them out of a fight even when the odds are against them.'

'They have been a thorn in the Alliance's side for years, even before Sisko and Smiley made the rebellion what it is today. There are some that said humanity should have been completely wiped out. I believe they should have been forced back into their own system and hemmed in.'

Astar smiled wryly. 'They would have found a way to get around that, they always do.'

'*Captain Astar to the bridge. We're all being hailed by the Imperium flagship,*' Gonzales called over the comm.

'I'm on my way,' she replied and looked at Macet again. 'You should return to your ship.'

'Indeed.'

They entered the bridge together and Macet headed for the turbolift, followed by a security officer. Astar moved to the centre chair and sat down. 'On screen.'

She was surprised to see a relatively familiar face, even it was not entirely unexpected. ***'This host was called Tal'Aura, and it will serve my purpose for you to call me by that name. The Vorta have been exterminated under my authority. The Pah Wraith control the Imperium and the Jem'Hadar. You will hand over the false prophet or you will all die.'***

'Thank you for doing part of our job for us. All we need to do now is kill you,' Astar replied. 'How long before they enter weapons range?'

'Eleven minutes,' Gonzales answered.

'Red alert, all hands to battle stations.'

'You will not survive this encounter.'

'Are you still here? End communication.'

Larson chuckled. 'That's gonna make her mad.'

'Ensign, mind your station. You're going to have some fancy flying to do.'

'Yes ma'am.'

Astar looked at the viewscreen as the Cardassians and Klingons moved into a formation that covered a lot of three dimensional distance while providing any ship help if necessary. It was an ingenious formation.

'Gonzales, record this formation and let's see how well it works.'

'Aye sir,' the Betazoid replied. 'The Imperium fleet will be in weapons range in six minutes.'

'Signal, the other ships to ready their own formations, but to stay out of each other's line of fire.'

'All ships have acknowledged,' Gonzales said, surprised. 'They seem to have accepted you as the leader of the fleet.'

'I hope they've been able to get the modifications made to their ships otherwise this is going to be a short battle.'

'Three minutes to weapons range.'

'Prepare a full volley of photon torpedoes. I don't want to use the quantum torpedoes unless absolutely. I'm doing enough damage to this universe as it is.'

'Aye sir, photons loaded, awaiting targets.'

'I want you to fire on the flagship as soon as they drop out of warp. Let the others take care of the rest of the fleet.'

'Incoming message from the flagship.'

'On screen.'

'You have wasted enough of my time,' the Pah Wraith told her. 'I know you sent the Prophet to the Celestial Temple, and that is where it will be destroyed. You, however, will die here, far from home. I will see to it personally.'

'If you say so,' Astar replied. 'But remember this. As soon as the Prophet enters the Celestial Temple, you will be expelled from it for eternity.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

USS Pytheas

In orbit of Rura Penthe

June 2, 2378 (Stardate 55417.7)

Twenty-seven vessels of various sizes dropped out of warp less than one million kilometres from the combined Klingon, Cardassian and New Hebitian fleet. Most of them were the scorpion-like ships, with the others being larger cruisers resembling the beetle cruisers of the other universe. There were two dreadnoughts and the flagship. All three of which led wings of eight other ships against the combined fleet. The dreadnought-led wings went after the Klingons and Cardassians, and the flagship-led wing attacked the *Pytheas* and the New Hebitians. Ensign Larson immediately evaded the opening salvo from the flagship as Gonzales locked on and fired the photon torpedoes.

'Direct hit,' she crowed. 'The modified quantum signature works. Their shields are down to sixty percent.'

'Keep firing,' Astar ordered. 'What is the status of the other ships?'

'The Alliance ships are holding their own but Macet's fleet is being hammered. They haven't been upgraded in years.'

'Tell him to go after the smaller, less armed ships. Leave the big boys to us.'

'He acknowledges, and sends his regrets.'

'Larson, watch out for that cruiser!' Talen called out.

'I see it,' the helmsman replied as he tried to avoid the oncoming ship. 'Brace for impact.'

The Jem'Hadar cruiser scraped shields with the *Pytheas* before Gonzales fired continuous phasers at its engines and it exploded, the shockwave buffeting the ship.

'That was too close,' Talen muttered.

'The flagship is coming around for another pass. Martok's ship is venting atmosphere and the Klingons are making suicide runs at the Jem'Hadar. The New Hebitians are withdrawing to a safe distance. They have something

planned.'

'Adjust our course to match the flagship and prepare for a strafing run, full impulse and ventral phasers.'

'Aye sir, course laid in,' Larson said.

'Phasers locked,' Gonzales added.

'Let's go, before they can lock that polaron beam on us.'

The *Pytheas* shot forward, outpacing the smaller cruisers attempting to pincer it, and Larson pushed the ship over the bow of the Imperium flagship before Gonzales let loose with a phaser volley. They swung around, ready to attack the flagship's ventral shields with their dorsal phaser array when Gonzales gasped.

'Captain, I'm picking up a huge subspace distortion. Whatever is coming in at warp is huge.'

'Details, Commander.'

Gonzales ran her hands over her panel and checked against all known references. 'If I didn't know any better, sir, I'd say there was a starbase coming in, at warp three.'

'Fall back, order all ships to rendezvous with the New Hebitians.'

'Aye sir, so ordered.'

Twenty seconds later, a blinding flash of light heralded the arrival of a new ally into the fray. Gonzales was right.

'I remember hearing rumours about that being possible, from *Deep Space Nine*, but I never thought to see it with my own eyes,' Astar said.

Now in a high orbit of Rura Penthe was a *Nor*-class space station tractored by a dozen Hideki-class ships.

'Captain, those ships belong to the New Hebitians. They all carry Macet's crest. We're all being hailed, sir.'

'Put it up.'

'This is Legate Macet of New Hebitia. Rura Penthe is now under our direct control and any attempt to wrest it from us will result in your destruction. Regent Martok, please leave this system immediately, you are no longer welcome. Pah Wraith, I suggest you fight elsewhere. There will be no further warning. Captain Astar, thank you for your assistance, but your presence is no longer required.'

'Legate, we're only here to stop the Pah Wraith.'

'As you can see, that is no longer necessary, Captain. I suggest you rejoin your companion vessel before it runs foul of these creatures.'

'Sir, the Alliance ships are moving off, Klingons and Cardassians. Macet's vessels are taking up defensive positions around the planet and locking weapons on the Imperium fleet.'

'What are the Imperium vessels up to?'

'They're moving to attack the station.'

'Back us off, Ensign,' Astar ordered. 'Not a smart move on their part.'

A volley of photon torpedoes peppered the Imperium fleet, destroying half a dozen of the remaining scorpion ships, one of the dreadnoughts and severely weakening the overburdened flagship's shields still further.

'The Imperium fleet is moving off, Captain. They're heading for the Bajoran system at warp nine point two,' Gonzales added a moment later as they disappeared into warp.

Astar touched a control on the arm of her chair. 'Bridge to engineering.'

'Xeris here.'

'I need maximum warp for as long as you can give it to me.'

'Where are we going?'

'Bajor.'

'From here? That's a good three day journey at warp nine-point-nine-nine-five, Captain. I'll see what I can do.'

'Excellent, Astar out.'

'Course laid in,' Larson turned around. 'We should arrive approximately thirty minutes ahead of them if we can keep up our speed, Captain.'

'All right, Ensign. Maximum warp.'

Larson tapped the panel in front of the him and the *Pytheas* jumped into warp. Although the ship had a stable cruising velocity of warp 9.975, Xeris had pushed the maximum to 9.995, meaning that it was going to take them a third of the time it normally would to traverse the same distance. Larson enjoyed piloting the ship when it was travelling fast and had even designed a warp-capable shuttle capable of such speeds, but had no way to build it. He's submitted the design to the Advanced Starship Design Bureau, but they had rejected it citing several reasons, including the fact that there was little need in the current climate for a tactical shuttle capable of high warp.

Additionally, there were a couple of design flaws which he had not been able to work out, and hoped that they would be able to help. He felt that Starfleet had very few shuttles that were able to be used for a variety of missions, save for the type-11. If they'd had one of his shuttles today, they could have sent it ahead of the *Defiant* to take the Prophet to the wormhole. Larson looked at the chronometer and decided to seek out the chief engineer's help after shift to iron out the flaws in his design.

He had three days before they reached the Bajoran system.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Starbase 535

Kursican system (Our universe)

Stardate 55424.1 (June 4, 2378)

Captain Lionel Logan sat in his office watching the monitor on his desk. Spatial rifts were forming across the Kursican sector as a fleet of over thirty vessels emerged from wherever and headed toward the same place. The ships would rendezvous just outside the Kursican system itself in approximately two days and then the battle would be joined. The *Pytheas* was still nowhere to be found and the allied ships were en route, though whether they would arrive in time was anybody's guess. His door chimed and he switched the monitor off, unwilling to watch as the region was infested.

'Come.'

'Captain,' Commander Madden entered with McNamara following.

'Are we going to have this conversation again?' Logan asked.

'Yes sir, but we have evidence this time.'

Logan sighed. 'All right, let's hear it.'

'According to all the readings we have been able to take and verify from Captain Drummond, he is transmitting data on a telepathic frequency.'

'Can you interrupt it?'

'No sir, we know the frequency but every time we have attempted to scramble it, the frequency changes. The computer can't keep up with the changes. Who knows how much data the Captain has given to them by now. Our entire defensive system could have been compromised.'

'I understand your frustration, gentlemen, but this is a Starfleet Captain we're talking about.'

'With all due respect, Captain,' McNamara interrupted, 'he stopped being a Starfleet Captain when the alien consciousness took hold of him.'

'Do we know where the data is being sent?'

'Yes sir, to the Cha'lav vessel already holding position outside the system.'

Logan drummed his fingers on the desk, trying to think of another solution but knowing that there really wasn't one available. 'In your opinions, there's no possibility that the information is being to an ally, rather than an enemy?'

Both men shook their heads. 'No sir.'

'You realise this could start the battle prematurely?'

'We're aware of that, sir, but we can't even simulate misinformation. It's a calculated risk. Besides, we know they're already of our attempts at preventing the transfer.'

'All right, pull the plug.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Dismissed.'

Logan was left alone with his thoughts and reflected on the fact that this was the first time he had deliberately killed someone in cold blood, and even then, not by his own hands, but by proxy. It was a thought that did not sit well with him.

'Computer, begin recording log.'

'Recording started.'

'Captain's log, stardate 55424.2. New evidence has come to light that Captain Drummond has been inadvertently providing data to the enemy via a telepathic link while in a comatose state and being attacked by an unknown alien lifeform. It is for this reason alone that I have ordered life support to be cancelled immediately. I wish to note officially that I will take full responsibility for the death of Captain Drummond should a general court-martial be convened.'

'Additionally, there is one Cha'lav vessel currently on station just outside the Kursican system and approximately thirty-five more will be arriving in two days. All Starfleet vessels currently assigned to the station are patrolling the system, except for the Pytheas which has not been heard from for eleven days. The Ditagh and the Gilded Talon have also agreed to aid us in the fight against

the Cha'lav and the local allied force is sending as many ships as they can spare, though they may not reach us in time. End log.'

Logan stood up and headed into the operations centre to see Commander Madden standing by the Core, studying a number of readouts intently.

'Do you have something, Commander?'

'Yes sir, at least I think I do.'

'Well?'

'You asked me to look at all the data the Eeroth provided us about the last known location of the *Pytheas*. I've been doing that and something didn't make sense.'

'Go on.'

'According to their last known position and heading, they were going to *Deep Space Nine*, instead of coming back here, there was some kind of unusual spatial disturbance along that route that disappeared as quickly as it appeared. I looked at all the data and found an unusual quantum variance.'

Logan walked over to look at the data himself. 'Did you cross-check the data with the Starfleet library?'

'I did.'

'And?'

'The quantum signature on the particles in the area where the *Pytheas* disappeared match precisely those readings taken by Doctor Bashir and then-Major Kira when they crossed into what has been termed the mirror universe.'

'I've heard of it, isn't it supposed to be classified?'

'Yes sir, it is, but I asked Colonel Jatarn of *DS9* to confirm the readings. He just got back to me, sir.'

'So the *Pytheas* is trapped in the mirror universe?'

'It would appear so.'

'Then I hope they get out of there in time to help us. We need all the help we can get.'

'Yes sir.'

'Keep me informed of any further progress. Get me Captain Dhrex, I'll give him the bad news personally.'

'Aye sir,' Madden replied as Logan returned to his office.

Logan sat down and ordered a spiced tea from the replicator hoping to calm his nerves. He brought up Astar's personnel file on the monitor and skimmed it, reading in full only the part about her command abilities. He knew from reading that small section alone that she would be unable to keep out of the affairs of that universe if push came to shove. He hoped that her reports on whatever situations she was involved in would preclude the need for a court-martial but he couldn't see it happening that way.

His life was never that easy. After leaving the *Enterprise* after his tenure as chief engineer, he returned to the Academy to teach and one of his colleagues suggested he switch to command, which was where his real talent was. It took a long time, but he realised that was the truth, with all the burdens it represented.

Chapter Twenty-Five

USS *Pytheas*

Approaching Bajoran system

June 5, 2378 (Stardate 55427.3)

Captain Astar entered the bridge from her ready room as the ship slowed to impulse speeds and sat beside Gonzales on the raised central dais. 'Open a channel.'

'We don't know if he's here,' Gonzales replied. 'Sensors aren't showing any cloaked vessels in the area.'

'He's here.'

'Channel open,' Parker said from the tactical station.

'General O'Brien, I suggest that whatever you're planning on doing, you do quickly. The Imperium fleet is now under the direct control of the Pah Wraiths and they are less than two hours behind us.'

Their view of empty space changed to that of the *Defiant's* bridge. *'Thank you for the warning, Captain. We're almost ready to enter the wormhole. We just have one more task to complete,'* Smiley replied.

'Which is?'

'Retrieving the Orb of the Emissary from the Temple of the Kai on Bajor.'

'I take it there is a problem with that?' Astar asked, feeling a knot forming in her stomach.

'The Temple was razed when the rest of Bajor was attacked by the Vorta. No non-Bajoran is allowed on the surface, and anyone else will be shot on sight.'

'You didn't think about this?' she asked, almost snarling.

'The Prophet wasn't exactly forthcoming with that particular information.'

She sighed. 'I don't have any Bajorans on board, but I can have someone surgically altered.'

'Captain, may I suggest an alternative?' Gonzales asked.

'Go ahead.'

'Contact whoever is in charge down there and let the Prophet do the talking.'

'The Prophet has no power. She must interact directly with the Orb of the Emissary in order to exorcise the Pah Wraith from the Celestial Temple.'

'Then we need to go down there and secure the Temple of the Kai while she goes in and does her thing.'

Smiley stepped back to allow Natima Lang into the frame. *'Can you guarantee that no Bajoran will be harmed?'*

'All our weapons will be on stun. No Bajoran will be killed or severely injured, but there will be bruising. It is the best that I can offer under the circumstances,' Astar replied.

'Miss Lang, I know many Bajorans and once they understand that you carry the essence of a Prophet within you, they will gladly sacrifice themselves to make sure you are successful in retaking the Celestial Temple,' Gonzales added. 'Especially when they know that the Imperium will no longer be able to bother them.'

'This is not our way.'

'You must choose between what is right and what is easy,' Astar told Lang.

Lang and Smiley conferred for a few minutes. *'We will need assistance in securing the Temple of the Kai.'*

'We'll help you, but we must work quickly. The Imperium is closing fast.'

'We'll beam aboard momentarily, O'Brien out.'

'Parker, have a security team meet you in transporter room one and escort our guests to the observation lounge. Gonzales, return to your station and deploy the sensor probe array. I want a full scan of the system and the Denorios belt, and I want to see what we have on the Temple of the Kai.'

'Aye sir,' Parker replied and headed for the turbolift by the tactical station.

'I'm on it,' Gonzales jumped up and took Parker's place. 'Probes deployed, scan underway. I'm bringing up the Temple on the viewscreen now.'

'What can you tell me about it?'

'The Temple was built seven thousand years ago to house the Orbs of the Prophets and nine were placed there in deep vaults. That is where our universes differ. The Bajorans in our universe revered the Orbs as artefacts from the Celestial Temple and created a religion around them. The Bajorans in this universe treated them as articles of study for technological reasons. A tenth Orb, the Orb of the Emissary, was found and added to the collection in this universe. In ours, it was discovered by Captain Sisko on Tyree and he used it to remove the Pah Wraith from the Celestial Temple, returning the Prophets to their rightful place.'

'That is essentially the story,' Natima Lang said, emerging from the turbolift with Smiley, Parker and two security guards.

'You have more to add?' Astar asked as she and Gonzales walked toward the observation lounge.

'Not much,' she answered.

'What do you have to add?'

'The Bajorans in this universe never looked to us as gods or teachers or anything like that, but the Cardassians did, a long time ago.'

'The Oralian religion, from the Hebitian civilisation,' Gonzales said.

'Exactly.'

'The Prophets believed all corporeal beings in the multiverse acted the same, until they created the Emissary in this universe. Then they realised that every universe has a dynamic that works differently. The only constant in each universe is that the Pah Wraith take over the Celestial Temple and only the Emissary, using the Orb of the Emissary, can remove them. After Sisko's death in this universe, we decided that another Emissary must be chosen and Natima Lang was the one.'

'Because of her link to Oralius and her belief?'

'Yes and no,' Smiley added, 'and let's leave it at that.'

Astar wanted to push the point but they didn't have the time. 'Very well. I propose that my security people will secure the site and escort the three of us inside. We'll make our way to the Orb Vault, to the Orb of the Emissary and let things go as they may.'

'I find that acceptable. Your people have experience fighting the Jem'Hadar?' Lang asked.

'Too much. I know they'll lay ground troops to stop us and if that doesn't work they'll bombard the planet's surface. While we're down there, the *Pytheas* will remain in a low orbit of Bajor to provide cover should the bombardment begin. I hope it doesn't come down to that.'

'As do I, but I see little alternative. The Pah Wraiths will do everything in their power to prevent us reaching our goal.'

'Then we should leave immediately,' Gonzales said. 'Parker has four security teams on hot standby and four more on alert.'

'Talen to Astar, the Imperium fleet have just dropped out of warp. They'll be in orbit in eighteen minutes.'

'Acknowledged, Lieutenant. Inform Lieutenant Parker to have all standby security teams in the transporter rooms in five minutes; Astar out.'

Chapter Twenty-Six

Outside the Temple of the Kai

Ashalla, Bajor

June 6, 2378 (Stardate 55427.4)

Lieutenant Parker materialised on the hard-packed ground with her phaser in hand. Around her, twenty-three security officers and crewmen also had phasers or phaser rifles and fanned out across the entrance to the Temple which was currently clear of Bajorans. It was early morning and the sun was just creeping above the horizon. Once Parker was satisfied that there were no hostiles in the area, she tapped her combadge.

'All clear, Captain.'

Astar beamed down with Smiley and Lang, both of the latter holding Cardassian phasers. Astar had her phaser clipped to her waist, but held a tricorder in her hand.

'Lieutenant, keep the area secure. If you get surrounded and can't fight your way out, fall back into the Temple and use the entrance as a bottleneck, killing anything that comes through. There's a good chance that we'll lose communications when we go deep inside so don't let that be a factor.'

'Aye sir. I would again like to protest that you're not taking any security personnel with you.'

'Anjuna expressed a similar concern,' Smiley said. 'We don't to sacrifice too many people if this goes wrong.'

Parker nodded and strode toward the entrance. 'Alpha team, we're here. Bravo team, take the north, Charlie team take the east and Delta team, take south. No one gets through, unless they're one of us.'

Astar nodded at the formation and then took point, heading into the Temple entrance and Parker knelt on the ground waiting for the Jem'Hadar to materialise. She looked around at her own team and saw them checking their weapons again, just waiting.

'Gonzales to Parker, the flagship just entered orbit. The Jem'Hadar are on their way.'

'Acknowledged, Parker out,' she tapped her combadge. 'Stand ready!'

Less than a minute later, the air was thick with fighting. The Jem'Hadar had almost beamed into their midst, swinging their kar'takins and brandishing their rifles like clubs. The Starfleet teams were well trained and cut them down but they were only twenty four and the flagship held hundreds. A score of Jem'Hadar headed her way and she hefted her rifle, thumbing it to its highest setting and then set it on wide beam, which would reduce the effectiveness but take out enough to give her people some room. The wide beam countered the rifle's highest kill setting leaving the total effect a rather useful low kill setting that took out seven Jem'Hadar in one hit, and using up a third of the power cell.

Switching to standard tactics, Parker fired beam after beam at the approaching Jem'Hadar and they fell. She risked a single glance at the other teams and noted that a couple of her people had gone down but far more of the shock troops were hitting the dirt. This lasted for another few minutes after which another wave of Jem'Hadar beamed down.

'Parker to *Pytheas*, we need some help down here.'

'I'm beaming the rest of your teams into position,' Gonzales replied. *'The flagship is moving into bombardment position.'*

'You know what to do, Parker out.'

She continued to fire until the power cell was empty and then pulled from the pouch concealed in the small of her back, an *ushaan-tor*. Shouting an Andorian battle cry she leapt at the nearest Jem'Hadar and sliced his neck in two, severing the ketracel white tube in the process. He fell and she moved on to the next one, noting that a number of her comrades were doing the same, utilising their own combat knives or fallen kar'takins.

'Don't let them enter the Temple!' she yelled as a trio of Jem'Hadar broke through the now crumbling Starfleet defence perimeter.

The remainder of her ground-trained security force beamed in with fresh weapons and cut down the new Jem'Hadar arrivals swiftly. Within moments the odds were evened out again. She suddenly had a bad feeling about the battle and was proved right as a squadron of Jem'Hadar unshrouded almost on top of her. She slashed with the *ushaan-tor* and backpedalled to gain some room to manoeuvre but it wasn't enough. She hit the ground hard as she

tripped over a fallen Jem'Hadar and managed to avoid a killing stroke by the one chasing her. She pulled him towards her and took first one arm and then the other off before letting him drop to the dirt, gurgling as his white tube faltered.

Taking advantage of a lull, she tapped her combadge. 'Their white is running out, aim for the tubes.'

'We don't need the white,' a Jem'Hadar said as he loomed over her. 'You will know the name of your killer. I am First Halan'atan,' he said as he aimed his rifle at her.

'I'm K'Tyra Parker,' she replied as she jammed his comrade's kar'takin through his chest.

He fell on her, his rifle piercing her shoulder and she let out a scream of pain, throwing the soldier out of the way and pulling the rifle free in one movement. Looking at the gaping hole in her shoulder, she saw it was the wrong thing to do as blood began pouring freely from the wound. She didn't have enough energy left to call for help and was content to wait for death, angry only that she had not found and killed her blood-sister first.

She felt her consciousness start to go before the tingle of a transporter took her. She materialised in sickbay and Doctor Maxx immediately set to work on her, dressed in surgical scrubs.

'Don't sedate me, please.'

'This is going to hurt,' he said. 'There is no shame or dishonour in sedation.'

'Don't sedate me!' she pleaded. 'I want to know what is happening down there.'

'Your teams have almost completely wiped out the Jem'Hadar on the surface. Gonzales is trying to prevent the flagship from bombarding the surface,' Maxx told her as the ship shuddered violently.

'So they're hitting us instead,' Parker hissed through gritted teeth as Maxx sealed the ruptured blood vessels.

'Yes,' he muttered. 'You're lucky you inherited your redundant organs or you'd be dead by now.'

'Gonzales needs to give the Captain enough time to get the Prophet to the Orb,' she said and passed out.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Temple of the Kai

Ashalla, Bajor

June 6, 2378 (Stardate 55427.5)

Natima Lang sensed rather than felt the change in the atmosphere. Until now, they had been walking down several tunnels, each of which bore ancient inscriptions which she alone of the trio could read. They'd been walking for well over two hours and all sounds of the battle above had faded. The only sounds in the tunnels beneath the Temple were their own footsteps and a faint buzzing which was getting louder by the minute.

'We're getting close,' she told the others.

Astar pulled out her phaser. 'Wait here, I'll scout ahead.'

'Is that a good idea?' Smiley asked.

'Probably not, but I'll take my chances.'

They stood in silence for several minutes but Astar returned. 'The main chamber is just ahead, but the Bajorans are all dead and have been for some time. It looks like they committed suicide.'

'What makes you say that?' Lang asked as they resumed walking, this time at a faster pace.

'They're still holding ceremonial blades,' Astar replied. 'You'll see the rest in a moment.'

Lang gasped as she turned the corner. Inside the vault there were a dozen skeletons in various places on the ground, but the walls held her interest. There were ten niches, each holding an Orb, but of the ten, only nine were open and they were all dark. She recognised the inscriptions on the Orb cases and saw that all the Orbs sent to the Bajorans by the Prophets were there.

'The Orb of Contemplation, of Destiny, of Memory, of Prophecy and Change, the Orb of Souls, of Time, of Truth, of Unity...'

'And this one?' Smiley asked.

It was the only one that was closed.

'The Orb of the Emissary,' a voice echoed in the cavern. **'I warned you not to interfere.'**

'You belong here even less than we do,' Smiley said and fired his phaser.

'I think not,' the Pah Wraith replied and the phaser beam seemed to bend back on itself.

The general went flying into the wall, hitting it with a crack. Lang went over to him and touched his neck, feeling for a pulse.

'He's dead.'

'He was warned, as I am warning you. Do not open the Orb of the Emissary.'

'I'll open it then.'

'Stop!' Lang ordered. 'Only the Emissary can open the case. It may kill you.'

'I will kill you before you make it across the room,' the Pah Wraith said and raised her arms.

'Try your best,' Lang replied and strode toward the Orb.

Astar backed away as red-tinged electrical impulses flowed from what used to be Tal'Aura toward Lang. The Cardassian turned at the last moment and let loose with a stream of blue-tinged energy. The Pah Wraith kept moving forward, forcing Lang backward. They both stepped on and over skeletons in their quest to reach the Orb first. Lang realised that she was not going to get there in time and forced a stronger stream of energy against the Romulan.

The Pah Wraith stumbled for just a moment and cried out in anger as the cavern began to collapse. The strength of their combined energy too much for the ancient structure. Astar shot one look at Lang before she ran for the tunnel, hoping that her security officers were still alive and hoping that the Cardassian could finish what she started.

Lang reached the Orb case and held it as the Pah Wraith stepped closer.

'Don't move,' she commanded the Pah Wraith. 'Your time on this corporeal plane of existence ends now!'

The Pah Wraith glared with red eyes as Lang opened the Orb of the Emissary. A blinding beam light shot through the roof of the tunnel and into space, forcing open the wormhole which had been closed for so long. The Pah Wraith bellowed in fury and lunged at the Cardassian as the other nine Orbs suddenly came to life, flooding the chamber.

Both of them were instantly transported to the Celestial Temple and Lang saw only indistinct faces.

'You were right to take on corporeal form,' the voices said as one.

'The Celestial Temple belongs to the True Prophets. You will never win this battle,' the Pah Wraith countered.

'We have already won this battle, and the war,' the Prophets replied. *'Millennia ago, the Kosst Amojan was destroyed in the Fire Caves along with your brethren. You few are the last of the Pah Wraith.'*

'We few are stronger.'

'The Emissary has the strength to banish you from this plane of existence. You will no longer trouble the corporeal beings under our protection and you will no longer exist to cause pain.'

'If the Celestial Temple cannot be ours, it will never be yours!' the Pah Wraith responded with fury and lashed out, drawing the Temple's powerful energies toward them. **'This will be our final resting place, and yours, for eternity.'**

All of a sudden another figure appeared, this one neither Prophet nor Pah Wraith.

'You can see all universes from this place. See who wins in all battles and all wars.'

'Who are you?' The Pah Wraith asked.

The Prophets replied with just two words that explained nothing and everything. ***'The Sisko.'***

'It is of no consequence. The gates to the Celestial Temple will forever be closed.'

'They will remain open and you will leave,' The Sisko informed them and opened his arms wide.

The Pah Wraith found themselves drifting where there was nothing but energy. No matter for them to manipulate. **'We will recover our strength and bide our time. We will attack when they are not expecting it.'**

The Sisko turned to the Prophets. *'This universe needs your help. The Federation ship will be returning to my universe, but its crew will have left behind the greatest gift known to corporeal life.'*

'What gift is this?'

'Hope.'

'What is hope?'

'Hope is the very essence of the Game. In this universe you have many worlds to watch over, many worlds to teach your ways to.'

'This universe will take much of our time.'

'Yes, it will,' The Sisko smiled and disappeared.

Epilogue

USS *Pytheas*

In orbit of Bajor

June 6, 2378 (Stardate 55428.1)

Captain Astar watched the viewscreen as the Imperium ships headed back to the wormhole. The *Defiant* had already left with the Alliance fleet hot on its heels. She reflected on the fact that very little had changed in this universe since her arrival, except for the fact that there were many more dead than there had been before. Lieutenant Parker was recovering in sickbay and a third of the ship's security force were dead or seriously injured. She had dutifully entered every action into the ship's log and fully expected a court-martial upon her return to Federation space.

But now was not the time for recriminations. She had spoken to Commander Wright and the other humans and aliens from her own universe who had somehow ended up in this one and their stories were equally as innocuous as Wright's was at first glance, but taken together, it showed a plan as devious in the making as in the execution, but none of them knew who or what had instigated it. Astar turned her attention to more mundane things. In the last five hours, since her return from the surface, her crew had seen to the repairs and the ship was as ready as it was going to be to get back home.

'Lieutenant Malling, have you reconfigured the deflector to recreate Mister Wright's spatial rift?'

'Yes ma'am, all stations report ready.'

'Have you taken into account our position?'

'Yes ma'am. Like Wright did, I've calculated the rift to open exactly where we want to be.'

'Which is where?'

'One million kilometres from Starbase 535.'

'No temporal aspect?'

'No ma'am.'

'Let's hope we don't jump right into the middle of a battle then,' Gonzales muttered darkly.

'Let's hope,' Astar agreed. 'Mister Larson, prepare for impulse. Take us out of orbit.'

'Aye sir, moving us to a position proximate to the rift entrance.'

She nodded and toggled the ship-wide comm. 'This is Captain Astar. We will shortly be attempting to recreate the rift that brought us here in the hope that it can take us home to our loved ones. You have all proven yourselves in difficult circumstances and I have entered in my log that you all be commended for your efforts. That is all.'

'Stirring, sir,' Gonzales replied.

'We're in position,' Larson said.

'Malling?'

'Deflector charged and ready.'

'Let's go home.'

The invisible energy beam tore through the subspace strata and the visible rift rippled into existence. Torrents of violent energy swirled around the vortex and Malling adjusted the beam until it was as stable as she could make it.

'That looks nothing like Wright's rift,' Larson said.

'I've done the best I can. The computer has confirmed all the readings,' Malling shot back.

'Gonzales, give me a quantum reading.'

'It is our universe, I can tell you that much.'

'Anything else?' the captain asked.

'I'm reading such unusual energy signatures on the other side.'

'Malling?'

'We have to go through, now!' she cried out. 'They're trying to close the rift. They must think we're the Cha'lav.'

'Larson, punch it!' Astar ordered.

'Aye, Captain,' the helmsman replied and the ship surged ahead.

The *Pytheas* dived headlong into the swirling energy vortex and the crew were thrown from their stations to the deck as all power failed. Inertial dampers were the first to go and the shields failed second. Life support and lights were the last and ship was in complete darkness when it stopped moving. Larson was the first one back to his chair and he was able to halt their forward momentum by the time the lights came on and main power was restored.

'What the hell happened?' Gonzales asked, cursing.

'I don't know,' Malling answered, groaning in pain.

'Where are we?' Astar asked.

'We're being hailed,' Talen said.

'On screen.'

'*Captain, I'm so glad you could join us,*' Captain Logan said, the hustle and bustle of activity behind him. '*Mind telling me where you've been?*'

'It's all in my reports and logs,' she rejoined. 'Transmitting now.'

'*Your ship looks a little beat up.*'

'Nothing a good weld and polish won't fix.'

'*I want to see you in my office on the double, Captain; Logan out.*'

Astar sighed. 'Welcome home, everyone.'

The crew of the *Pytheas* will return in...**The Art of War.**